Neither Man nor Great Tradition Is an Island

March 12, 2012
Janelle Miniter
History 2206-02
First Thought Paper
Word Count: 1,483
Subject: RE: First Thought Paper Proposal  
Sent: February 18, 2012 10:40 PM  
From: Thomas Keene  
To: Janelle Miniter (jminiter)  
CC:  

I am good with a paper on the Dalai Lama (whom I greatly admire) but I am a not sure about a paper on his role as an ambassador, which seems to me too much like current events. What if you focus on the basis for his legitimacy as Tibetans see it, as well as the basis in Buddhist tradition (if there is one) for his sharing meditation techniques with out seeking converts? In short keep the focus on the tradition and it's application in the modern world via the Dalai Lama rather than on his role in the world. Will that work?

If you are ok with this variation on your proposal, consider this an approval.

Also, make a copy of this exchange and place it immediately after your title page when you submit the paper.

If you are not comfortable with this variation (which is fine; don’t feel pressured), then submit another, more focused/limited, proposal.

Thanks,

TK

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| From: Janelle Miniter  
| Subject: RE: First Thought Paper Proposal  
| Date Sent: February 16, 2012 9:24 PM  
| To: Thomas Keene (tkeene)  

Revised Thought Paper Proposal:

For my thought paper, I plan to research how the Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan spiritual/political leader, has become Buddhism’s greatest ambassador to the West. My paper will include the history of Buddhism, what makes Tibetan Buddhism distinct, and the role the persecution of Tibetan Buddhists has played in the spread of Buddhism to the West. I will also explore the Dalai Lama’s views on Christianity, which is my faith tradition, and his desire to serve the Christian community by teaching techniques of meditation without attaching the deeper Buddhist philosophy. I will use online articles from sites such as ReligionFacts.Com, and books such as The Essential Dalai Lama.

Janelle Miniter

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From: Thomas Keene  
Subject: RE: First Thought Paper Proposal  
Date Sent: February 15, 2012 3:31 PM
To: Janelle Miniter (jminiter)

Janelle,

I’m sorry, but this is a current events topic as written. The focus should be on the
great tradition, not current events. In this case you could look at how the rationale for the
Dalai Lama in the Buddhist tradition and how the idea of his being a head of state fits into
that traditions. Such a study would give you a little different, and historically deeper,
understanding of 1959.

Some other such variation would also work. Please submit again...
Sorry.
TK

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From: Janelle Miniter
Subject: First Thought Paper Proposal
Date Sent: February 12, 2012 9:19 PM
To: Thomas Keene (tkeene)

For my thought paper, I intend to explore the conflict between China and Tibet. China took power in Tibet in 1949. In 1959, the Tibetans revolted but were brutally
defeated by Chinese forces and as a result Tibet’s spiritual and political leader, the Dalai
Lama, fled to India to live in exile. I will explore how the conflict originated, what
motivates China to retain Tibet under its jurisdiction, and the role of Tibetan Buddhism
within this conflict. I intend to use current online articles concerning Tibet’s opposition to
Chinese government. In addition, I plan to consult various books on this subject matter.
Janelle Miniter
The great tradition of Buddhism began in India more than 2500 years ago and spread throughout Central Asia. It was not until the seventh century that Buddhism reached the kingdom of Tibet which has been described as “a great island set in a sea of high mountains.”¹ It was not until the thirteenth century that the institution of the Dalai Lama was established when Tibet entered a priest/patron relationship with Mongolia.² Today, the fourteenth reincarnation of the Dalai Lama lives in exile in India. As a spiritual leader living in the modern world, the Dalai Lama has a vision for Buddhists to build on the practice of the dharma by incorporating service to others following the example of the Catholic monastic tradition.

Buddhism emerged in Northern India during the middle of the Axial Age (800-200BCE). The founder of Buddhism was Siddhartha Gautama, a prince in the Himalayan region, who after being exposed to the suffering of his people, rejected his title and left the palace and his family in order to live a life of asceticism. He excelled at self-denial and other ascetic practices but then realized he had become prideful. As a result, he left the ascetic lifestyle and decided to meditate under a Bodhi tree. During his deep meditation he was met with Devaputra Mara, the lord of the demons, who tried to stop Siddhartha from attaining enlightenment. Nevertheless, Siddhartha triumphed and reached enlightenment becoming the Buddha. The Buddha taught his followers the dharma which included following the Middle Way or Eight Fold Path: 1) Right Belief, 2) Right Aspirations, 3) Right Speech, 4) Right Conducts, 5) Right Means of Livelihood, 6)

²John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 139
Right Endeavor, 7) Right Memory, and 8) Right Meditation. Practicing the dharma will enable them to attain enlightenment within their lifetime and reach nirvana.

The Buddha’s original teachings are most similar to the Buddhist school of thought known as Theravada, “Way of the Elders,” or Hinayana (The Lesser Vehicle). This sect of Buddhism is most commonly practiced in Southern Asia (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand). Followers of this sect adhere to the Pali Canon collection of the Buddha’s teachings. The more popular, Northern Asian, Mahayana sect of Buddhism adheres not only to the Pali Canon but to the Sutras - a later collection of writings written in Sanskrit rather than Pali. The greatest difference between these sects is that the Theravada adherents believe that they must go through many lives in order to become arhats, perfect saints who have attained enlightenment and will never be reborn again. Mahayana adherents, on the other hand, believe they can obtain enlightenment within one lifetime and become bodhisattvas, compassionate saints who have obtained enlightenment but halt their entrance into nirvana in order to help others obtain enlightenment. Tibet practices the Mahayana sect of Buddhism.

Buddhism first arrived in Tibet during the seventh century when Tibet was surrounded by neighboring Buddhist kingdoms. In order to forge alliances, the Tibetan king married two foreign wives: a Buddhist Nepalese princess and a Chinese Buddhist princess. During the eighth century, the Tibetan King, Trisong Detsen, officially established Buddhism as the state religion with the help of the Indian saints Santaraksita and Padmasambhava. The king first summoned Santaraksita from India in hopes of

strengthening Buddhism within Tibet; however he was met with opposition due to the popularity of the indigenous religion, Bön. Then Padmasambhava was summoned. He excelled in tantric practices and was able to overcome the demons from the Bön religion garnering the peoples’ support. This resulted in the establishment of Tibet’s first Buddhist monastery and the translation of the Buddhist texts into the Tibetan language.⁵

During the thirteenth century, most of Central Asia had been brought under the control of the Mongolian empire. In 1207, to avoid the Mongolian invasion of Tibet, a Tibetan envoy met with Genghis Khan and established a relationship whereby Khan would be Tibet’s overlord. Despite this relationship, Godan, Genghis Khan’s grandson, summoned Tibet’s spiritual leader, Sakhya Pandita, to Mongolia in 1249 to secure the surrender of Tibet. Ironically, Godan’s meeting with Sakhya Pandita resulted in Godan’s conversion to Buddhism. Thus, Mongolia and Tibet forged a new patron-priest relationship.⁶ In 1578, Altan Khan conferred the title “Dalai” on Tibet’s lama, Sönam Gyatso. In Mongolian, the term Dalai means ocean implying the Dalai Lama is an ocean of wisdom.⁷

The Mongolian empire eventually waned and Tibet lived in isolation until the exile of the current fourteenth Dalai Lama in 1959. The Dalai Lama views that the “tragedy of losing his country has created new opportunities [like]…meeting with other

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⁵ John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 126-129
⁶ John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 139
⁷ John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 143
people from different religious traditions.” 8 One of his most significant relationships was with Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk of Roman Catholicism’s most ascetic order. 9 It was this relationship that became a bridge linking Buddhist monks to their counterparts in the Christian faith and inspired the Dalai Lama to call for an inter-monastic global conference held at the Abbey of Gethsemane, the home of Thomas Merton, in July 1996. 10 The Dalai Lama addressed the conference:

“Every religion and culture has its distinguishing characteristics. For Tibetans, the emphasis for many centuries has been on developing and upholding inner values such as compassion and wisdom…However, I am aware that this inner search can lead to a kind of peaceful complacency. I feel that we Buddhists have much to learn from our Christian brothers and sisters… [who] … have a richer experience of bringing that inner peace to bear in practical ways in the generous service of others.” 11

The Dalai Lama has incorporated the idea of service into the dharma as conveyed by Saogyal Rinpoche, a Tibetan monk who gave the keynote address at a conference on Buddhism in America, in 1998. He told the conferees that the Dalai Lama believes there are two ways to present the dharma in the modern world:

“One is to offer the teachings, in the spirit of Buddhism, without any notion of exclusivity or conversion, but as openly and as widely as possible, to be of service to people everywhere, of any background or faith. Since the heart of the Buddha dharma…is so very practical… it can enrich and deepen anyone’s understanding, regardless of what spiritual path he or she might follow. The second way is to present the teachings for those who have a serious intention of wanting to follow

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the dharma, so that they can pursue a complete thorough path, in whichever tradition.”

Saogyal Rinpoche further described the two ways to present the dharma as a “blueprint for… the 21st century, and crucial for the survival of authentic Buddhism.”

A basis for the two ways to present the dharma can be found in the Buddhist tradition of The Middle Way, a cornerstone of Buddhist practice which rejects all extremes. In this sense meditation without service could be viewed as extreme. Thus, the Dalai Lama counsels Buddhists that “there may have been some grounds for…isolation in the past[,]…Buddhist clergy and monastics should develop a more sensitive conscience about what is really happening in the world [so]…a Buddhist community will express its concern and we can change the world for the better.”

Prior to 1959, the geographical and self-imposed isolation of Tibet kept the Dalai Lama insulated from the modern world. As a refugee in India, he has had the opportunity to meet with other religious leaders, most significantly Thomas Merton, which broadened his vision of the dharma to include service to others. The Dalai Lama has embraced the Western realization that “no man is an island entire of itself” and encourages Buddhists of all traditions to become active members of the global community because “for whom the bell tolls” means Buddhists, too.

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13 John Powers, Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), 22
Bibliography

Religion Facts.com helped me understand the Buddhist sect Mahayana, and how the Mahayana sect differs from the Theravada sect.

This source gave me a geographic description of Tibet as an island surrounded by mountains.

This source revealed to me that the Dalai Lama found a positive aspect of his exile in his new found relationship with the Catholic monastic community.

This source revealed to me that the Dalai Lama called for a global inter-monastic conference where he asked Buddhists to replace their isolationist tendencies with service to others as exemplified by their Christian monastic counterparts.

This source described to me how Buddhism was established in Tibet and how the title Dalai Lama came to be.

Religion Facts.com described the Theravada sect to me and how it was based on the Pali Canon.

This source described to me who Thomas Merton was and the significance of his Roman Catholic monastic order.

This source provided a transcription of the keynote address given by Saogyal Rinpoche conveying the Dalai Lama’s view that there are two ways to present the dharma today.