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# Tibetans in Exile: Monastic and Secular Education of Monks in Nepal

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*In recognition of the different and changing needs for education in exile, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Nepal has founded its own secular school for its monks. What are the consequences of sending the monks to school; does this strategy mark the beginning of the end to the Tibetan monastic tradition?*

The last two decades has seen the building of a large number of monasteries by Tibetans in exile in Boudhanath, a rapidly growing suburb 6 kilometres outside Kathmandu in Nepal. With the Great Boudhanath Stupa as a unifying centre for Buddhist devotees, this area has since 1959 been the residence for an increasing number of Tibetan refugees. Originally a village the whole area is in a rapid transition of urbanisation. After the first sight of the many local Nepalese and Tibetan people circumambulating the Boudhanath Stupa, the picturesque buildings of the Tibetan monasteries capture the eyes of the visitor. In 1999, the number of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in and around Boudhanath was nearing 30 compared to 12–15 in the early 1980s. Tibetan monasteries adhere in ge-

neral according to tradition, but they are also subject to social and cultural changes, and the Tibetan monastic tradition does no longer hold a dominant position in the transmission of knowledge as compared to pre-1959 Tibet. Parents now do have several alternatives as to where and what kind of schooling they want for their children. In Boudhanath there are private Nepalese schools and Nepalese public primary schools (1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade) of which the public schools have been largely sponsored by foreign aid. Several private Tibetan schools as well as Tibetan Schools managed by the Tibetan Government in Exile in Dharamsala have also been established.

Based on fieldwork in Boudhanath 1999, the present article studies a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Boudhanath, here

called Tashi. Tashi monastery differs markedly from other Tibetan monasteries, because its monks attend secular school together with laychildren of both sexes. I shall argue that this combined monastic and secular education of monks is an effective means for the continuation and even an expansion of the Tibetan Buddhist monastic tradition amongst the Tibetan in exile.

When the Nepalese government allowed the establishing of private schools during the 80s the Tibetan in exile eagerly took to this opportunity. Prior to this many Tibetan parents had sent their children to Catholic boarding schools at various places in India, because at that time primary and secondary schools in Nepal were known to be poor with incapable teachers. To maintain a balance between traditional and modern education, the Central Tibetan Administration, situated at Dharamsala in India, emphasises in *the Development Plan for 1995–2000* that younger monks and nuns to be encouraged to study English and other secular subjects. This proposal was put into practice when many Tibetan monasteries in India and Nepal during the 1990s began teaching the monks secular subjects, mainly English and science, but also history, mathematics and geography. These teachings usually take place within the walls of the monastery and by male teachers only. As pointed out by Bourdieu, a skilful player in a game should place himself where the ball is expected to fall and not where it has al-



ready fallen. Thus the abbot of Tashi monastery was ahead of time when already in 1986, he founded a private English Secondary day and boarding school, here called Namgal School, within the vicinity of the monastery in Boudhanath. Since then the younger monks from Tashi monastery have attended the school as full-time students together with lay children of both sexes and in this aspect the school stands out from other schools. According to Nepalese law, the Namgal School is registered under the Nepalese Ministry of Education and curriculum and exams follow official requirements.

However, Tibetan tradition and Buddhist values are specifically emphasised during classes and also by the daily participation of the lay students in a ritual ceremony for the deity of compassion, Chenrezig, the patron deity of Tibet. During 1999, approximately 80 monks (aged 6–17) from Tashi monastery attended classes ranging from nursery school to class nine at Namgal School. The monks also attend exams equally with their lay schoolmates, 109 boarders and 48 day students. Every morning the ‘school monks’ leave the monastery in a spectacular 30-metre-long file, to walk the 500 metres to Namgal School, all dressed in the traditional maroon robes of monks and carrying colourful nylon schoolbags on their backs. At three o’clock in the afternoon the ‘school monks’ return to Tashi monastery where they resume the life of monks.

### Recruitment of monks

An absolute necessity for running a monastery is the presence of monks. In pre-1959 Tibet it was a custom that each family would send one of their sons to be educated in the monastery, as this was considered a great privilege for the family. To give the child to the monastery was also a culturally accepted way of reducing the amount of persons in



the household. During my interviews with exile Tibetans in Kathmandu the importance of the continuation of the monastic tradition was often mentioned. A common opinion was: *‘The only identity left with us is our religion – it is our culture. We have a unique culture, and if we throw away the monastic culture or if we think negatively about it, then we don’t have much.’* Ideals, however, do not compete well with pragmatism. In spite of holding the monastic tradition in high esteem the majority of exile Tibetan parents choose not to enrol their children at the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. Secular education is considered the most useful, and many exiled Tibetans prefer to enroll their children in the Tibetan schools, or if the family is wealthy, to send their children to expensive boarding schools in India. Since exile Tibetans are reluctant to enroll their children at the monastery, how do monasteries manage to recruit monks? At Tashi monastery, as in most other monasteries in the Kathmandu area, around 80% of the monks are recruited from the northern Himalayan regions in Nepal i.e. Dolpo, Manang, Nar, Tsum, Nubri, Yolmo and Langthang where the population is ethnically Tibetan and in most cases

very poor. Being ethnic Tibetan signifies common Tibetan Buddhist religion, Tibetan language (with dialects) and Tibetan cultural traditions. Having been living within the political borders of Nepal for generations these Himalayan ethnic Tibetan people are distinguished from exile Tibetan by not being refugees.

I was told that the monastery served in many ways like an orphanage, but my research showed that in Tashi monastery only 10% of the monks had one parent, and just 1,5% were fully orphaned. Except for a very few monks with wealthy parents, the majority of the monks in the monastery came from poor families. Children accepted by Tashi monastery are provided with free food, lodging, clothing, a secular primary schooling and a religious schooling, i.e. to learn the reading of Buddhist scriptures and to perform the Buddhist rituals and ceremonies. Thereby, children who receive this education are given the opportunity to live a respected and valued life from a social point of view. If poor families prefer to send their children to a secular boarding school, they usually have to find a sponsor. Personal sponsorship is difficult to arrange, and it can furthermore bring unpleasant surprises compared to

an agreement with a monastery, which is secure in this respect. The life for a child in a monastery is generally considered safe and healthy. It disciplines unruly children and provides protection from an urban development of drug abuse, etc.. But within the social and cultural context in Tibetan communities a Tibetan Buddhist monastery offers more than just a place for poor destitute children to be fed and raised. An important motivation for sending the children to the monastery is faith in the Buddhist doctrine and in the Buddhist concept of the accumulation of 'merit'. In a Tibetan Buddhist comprehension a morally and religiously right livelihood accumulates 'merit', a sort of 'karmic capital' which from an ultimate point of view leads to the attainment of Buddhahood or Enlightenment. From a relative point of view, 'merit' can lead to a better rebirth and, if you are lucky, to a long and successful life. The life of a monk is considered very 'meritorious', and many parents mentioned that should the child not remain a monk, the time spent in the monastery would undoubtedly provide him good 'merit' afterwards.

Why do the majority of the exile Tibetan parents prefer to have their children educated in a secular school when the Tibetan Buddhist monastic tradition is generally highly respected? The answer lies for a large part in the issue of defecting monks. Since this issue still is a taboo, as it is regarded an embarrassment for the monastery and for the defecting monks themselves, it is very difficult to put a figure on how many monks actually remain within the monastic tradition. I estimate that 40–50% of the monks defect usually at the age of 16–25, and visits to most monasteries show very few middle-aged or elderly monks in comparison to the large amount of child monks. Several Tibetan

people mentioned to me that defecting monks are a great loss for the monasteries, which have been spending resources of food, lodging and education for the monk. Therefore, it was suggested that defecting monks or nuns should pay a fine if they wanted to leave the monastery or nunnery. This theory was actually put into practice at a nunnery within the Kathmandu area, where defecting nuns are charged 20 Nepalese rupee a day counting from the first day of their entire stay at the institution. The longer period of time a nun spends at the nunnery, the larger a fine for permission to leave it. This kind of fine was strongly objected to by the monks of Tashi monastery as well as at most other monasteries. It was a general statement that monks must be free to leave if they really want to, although it is expected that a monk should sponsor an offering ceremony for the monastery before leaving.

Then why do so many monks defect? Most monks are placed in the monastery by their parents at the age of 6–8 years, and it is therefore understandable that many defect when they are capable of making their own choice. Some Tibetans argue that 'westernization' and an increased knowledge of English are the main reasons why many monks defect. Also the location of the monastery in an urban area are supposed to pose a threat. However, most people agree that contact with girls is the most common reason for monks to defect. In this respect, it therefore seems that the daily contact, which the 'school monks' from Tashi monastery have with the girls at Namgal school, do present a potential risk for the monks to lose interest in the life as a celibate monk at a monastery. But this risk is not seriously present before the boys reach the age of approximate 16 years, and many monks at Tashi monastery were

even convinced that the amount of defecting monks at their monastery was considerably lower than at other monasteries.

### Monks in school

The passing of 8<sup>th</sup> grade in a Nepalese school provides admission for enrolment at an institution for higher education, for instance at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath in India. This possibility for admission could prove useful for the monks. However, instead of completing the school curriculum up to the 10<sup>th</sup> or even just the 8<sup>th</sup> grade at the Namgal School, the monks are generally taken back to the Tashi monastery after completing the 7<sup>th</sup> grade in order to then concentrate on the Buddhist philosophical training. Most monks reach 7<sup>th</sup> grade – sometimes only the 3<sup>rd</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> grades – when they are 16 years old because many monks enrol late at school. Thus it is their age and not the level of school grade, which determines when their secular schooling comes to an end.

Teachers, children as well as parents expressed satisfaction of the functioning of Namgal School with the mixture of monks and laychildren. Off school time the monks are free to play basketball at the school playground, a play often joined by the girls. Teachers point out that during classes the monks are more polite and disciplined towards the girls than are the layboys. Another distinction is that monks appeared to learn remarkably faster than most of the laychildren. This could be due to the traditional training of the monks at the monastery, which strongly emphasises learning Buddhist texts by heart. But it could also be due to the fact that the monks are in general older than their classmates, as they often enrol late at school. Several monks at the age of 12–14 years were enrolled at kinder-

garten or 1<sup>st</sup> class level, and these monks often drop out of school early, as it becomes too embarrassing for them to continue to join class with minors. For some layboys the acquaintance of the 'school monks' at the Namgal School had been such an inspiration that they personally choose to become novice monks. Also some of the laygirls had requested to become nuns after leaving school, which usually is after the 5<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Although the majority of the children at both the boarding school and at the monastery come from the same Himalayan rural regions in Nepal, the common language at the school is Nepalese, whereas the monks mostly speak Tibetan. It therefore seems that living at the Tashi monastery reinforces a stronger sense of Tibetan culture and traditions than do the conditions at the Namgal School. Some teachers also complained that not being refugees themselves, the children from the Nepalese Himalayan rural regions didn't take much interest for the 'case of a free Tibet' nor did they care for learning Tibetan language well, as did the (very few) children from families of exile Tibetans.

### Local and global interplay

What is the significance of sending the monks to schools in a local and global context? I find that the interplay between the 'school monks' from the Tashi monastery and the lay school-children at the Namgal School is a mutual benefit and inspiration for the Tashi monastery and for the local community. The presence of the monks in the school conveys valued moral Buddhist ethics and behaviour to the lay-children and the acquisition of secular knowledge is important for the monks as they do live in and therefore interact with a modern society. With knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures only a defected monk often faces a difficult life after leaving the monas-

tery. A secular schooling, at least up to the primary level (5<sup>th</sup> class), provides a monk with a basic knowledge, which is very useful should a monk choose to leave the monastery. A combined secular and monastic schooling for monks could also make it more attractive for exile Tibetan parents to enrol their children at the monastery.

Some exile Tibetans had the opinion that not being refugees themselves the Nepalese Hima-

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layan ethnic Tibetans take advantage of the support, which is given to the exile Tibetans and Tibetan monasteries for having a refugee status. However, exile Tibetan parents prefer to enrol their children at secular schools and newly arrived Tibetan refugees to Nepal are sent on to India by law. It therefore appears that many Tibetan Buddhist monasteries have a need to recruit their monks amongst the children from the Nepalese Himalayan regions. But it should be taken into account that not all children from the rural Himalayan regions can be brought down to Kathmandu for schooling; nor is this desirable. A village child, who receives a secondary or higher education in Kathmandu, rarely returns to live at the village. I was frequently told that in remote Himalayan regions like Dolpo and Nubri the few primary schools are often located three days' walk away from the villages, and there are no public boarding schools accessible. As children are often needed for domestic labour, it is not all people living in the remote areas

who understand and value their children's education. Those parents who do are often left with no other alternative than to send a child to a monastery, or to find an (often foreign) sponsor to pay the expenses for the enrolment of the child at a private boarding school, both usually located in the Kathmandu area.

Knowledgeable monks are definitely of significance to any monastery. Therefore, secular schooling of monks (and nuns) is an effective means for the continuation of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition within the modern society. Secular knowledge is an important qualification for assisting in the administrative work within the monastery. Furthermore, a combined secular and monastic education can provide Tibetan monks the capability to present their knowledge of Buddhism in the present global context and then communicate it to interested people around the world. Although Tashi monastery does not have any direct financial income from managing the Namgal School, the school is nevertheless an important asset for the monastery, because it provides the monastery with a tremendous 'symbolic and cultural capital', which has a potential for being converted to 'economic capital'. The value and significance of education for children is globally acknowledged. To have a 'symbolic and cultural capital' in this respect is very important for Tashi monastery, because both Namgal School and Tashi monastery are mainly financed by foreign sponsorships.

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