

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<http://journals.sfu.ca/cjbs/index.php/cjbs/index>

Number 12, 2017

HH Chamgon Kenting Tai Situpa on The Relevance of Tibetan Buddhism in the 21st Century

Alice Zhao

University of British Columbia

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author.

HH Chamgon Kenting Tai Situpa on The Relevance of Tibetan Buddhism in the 21st Century

Alice Zhao

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

The development of technology and urbanization in contemporary society has set more people free from farm and traditional labour. Worries and concerns have been raised concerning this rapid progress, yet many Buddhist teachers regard it as an advantage for the spread and practice of Buddhism.

On May 15th, 2016, His Holiness Chamgon Kenting Tai Situpa Rinpoche gave a public talk titled “The Relevance of Tibetan Buddhism in the 21st Century” at the Frederic Wood Theatre of the University of British Columbia. Commenting on those city-dwellers distanced from farm life, Tai Situpa Rinpoche suggested that most people in the 21st century have the intellect and time to learn Buddhism, despite those urbanites who may lack the common sense to know the milk they drink comes from cows rather than bottles, he joked. In fact, Tai Situpa Rinpoche finds that Buddhism is not only accessible but relevant to modern society.

The title Tai Situpa is one of the most important lineages of reincarnated lamas within the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. The cur-

rent twelfth Tai Situpa Rinpoche is a renowned scholar, poet, artist, calligrapher, architect, and geomancer. He is also eagerly involved in the advancement of interfaith and intercultural humanitarian efforts.

In Defining Tibetan Buddhism

Tai Situpa Rinpoche began the talk by stating four categories of the Buddha's teaching which constitute Tibetan Buddhist practice. He noted that the word 'category' is not an exact translation of the Tibetan term but would be used in the talk for the sake of communication. The first category of teaching, *Vinaya*, explains the four Noble Truths in great detail. It is the moral foundation of Tibetan Buddhist practices. The second category is *Shunyata* or Emptiness. The third is the right motivations and conduct of the Bodhisattva. The fourth is the transformation of relative imperfection into its primordial source which is beyond time and dualism. It is from the primordial source that all phenomena are manifested. Tai Situpa Rinpoche explains that the primordial source is always perfect and cannot be contaminated. It is called by different names such as Buddha-nature, ultimate emptiness, or primordial wisdom.

Against the concern of Buddhism losing its legitimacy in modern times, he emphasized that Buddhism is always relevant as long as there exists one suffering sentient being. Each person will interpret the teachings differently but there is no doubt that the experience will be directly relevant to him/her.

The Process of Tibetan Buddhist Practice

In the next part of the talk, Tai Situpa Rinpoche explained the most fundamental steps in the Tibetan Buddhist practice which are the following:

Impermanence

The first practice is to shed our illusion of the world as being permanent. Our ego, which creates the illusion, is the reason for our suffering. Nothing stays the same. The world changes all the time.

Karma

According to the Buddhist teaching, *Karma* is the driving force behind *samsara* (World of Existence). Karma can be understood as cause and result. It includes both actions and intentions. Tai Situpa Rinpoche indicated that, as long as there exists the sense of “I” and dualism, there will be karma. Thus, karma is a relative truth. Ultimately, after overcoming dualism, there will be no karma.

Suffering of Samsara

Tai Situpa Rinpoche noted that the nature of *samsara* is filled with suffering which stems not only from misery but also from the desire to satisfy oneself. By understanding the imperfection of *samsara*, one will be able to adopt a right attitude to overcome suffering.

Genuine Devotion

Tai Situpa Rinpoche made a comparison at this point to illustrate what genuine devotion is. He said, people with unhealthy devotion often had a low sense of self-worth. They are intimidated by the higher spiritual authority and dare not do anything without permission. They avoid

their responsibilities under the guise of devotion. He called it lazy devotion.

On the contrary, genuine devotion helps you know where you currently stand and what you can be. With it, you can compassionately recognize lesser people and show your devotional respect to people with more compassion.

Visualization

To visualize oneself as a Buddhist deity is the next step in Tibetan Buddhist practice. Visualizing the good qualities of the deity helps practitioners to overcome the attachment to their own body and ego.

Completion

Visualization is followed by completion. In this stage, even the attachment to a deity or Bodhisattva's image needs to be overcome as well. This last step is similar to the destruction of a sand-mandala which symbolizes the ephemerality of the world, which encompasses both desirable and miserable things.

The Relevance of Tibetan Buddhism

Tai Situpa Rinpoche suggested that Tibetan Buddhism is increasingly relevant to contemporary society with its stage-by-stage practice method. According to him, more people in the twenty-first century have the intellectual capacity to understand Tibetan Buddhism; and the technological development and economic growth offer people with more time and the right conditions to practice accordingly. Further, Tibetan Buddhism does not require people to devote vast amounts of time to practice; hence it is more relevant in the twenty-first century than before.

Tai Situpa Rinpoche's talk was a blend of Buddhist teachings, secular stories, and analogies, effectively presenting the Buddhist contents to an audience of different cultural backgrounds. This talk was made possible by the generous contribution of The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Program in Buddhism and Contemporary Society at the University of British Columbia.

The talk can be viewed online [here](#).