

The Marriage of the Media and Religion: For Better or Worse

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Abstract

This paper briefly explores the 'relationship' between Buddhist spirituality and the various forms of media during the 2500 years of Buddhist history. In doing so, it highlights the flexibility of Buddhism in taking the multiple forms of media as useful means for a spiritual end that culminates in the state of enlightenment. The article also raises the problems and prospects of the new encounter between Bhutan's ancient Buddhist heritage and modern mass media. It goes on to argue that the media is intrinsically a neutral tool and that an educated and expedient use can only further the cause of Buddhism.

Introduction

Bhutan's Buddhist spirituality and the mass media culture appear to be disparate, even diametrically opposed, the former being characterised by an introverted and deeply spiritual significance and the latter by an extroverted, superficial and material leaning. The former is ancient and sacred, while the latter is seen as modern, worldly and even diabolic. Religious institutions and persons even look down on media, such as TV and movies, as distractions inimical to spiritual study and practice. They are often classed as works of *devaputramāra*, a celestial enticer who, in Buddhist literature, embodies deception and distraction of the highest kind.¹

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¹ *Devaputramāra*, 'the demon of god's son' is one of the four diabolic forces to be overcome on the path to Buddhahood. The other three are the demons of death, aggregates and afflictive emotions. Rather than being external obstacles, they represent the four kinds of internal existential bondages.

However, in a world which is inundated and influenced by mass media and in which the interdependencies between the media and other social systems are forged inextricably, a complete abnegation of the modern media culture is not even possible, let alone easy. The reliance of religious systems on mass media is inevitable for its survival in the larger society. For instance, religious institutions, without the support of the media, will fail to even retain its former audience merely through their services in monasteries.

Moreover, the ubiquity and intensity of the media have turned it into one of the most powerful social phenomena. The media is a major force in running the contemporary society and its impact is considerable in many areas. The perspectives the media takes, or the stress the media puts on certain religious issues, can even affect the message of religions. So, do our religious institutions need to change their perception of mass media? What approach should our religious institutions adopt toward the overwhelming presence of the media? Should we redefine religion and spirituality in the light of our new media environment? How can they make use of media to serve as channels for imparting a religious value education to the public? Similarly, (a question that arose during the conference) what can the media bodies do to preserve and promote religious heritage? How can we inject religious content into the media programmes to further the cause of Buddhism in Bhutan? And ultimately, what does the marriage of media and religion, which inexorably will happen, hold for us?

There are numerous such questions confronting a nation with a long history of deep and peaceful spirituality now suddenly exposed to the frenzy of several forms of mass media. It is neither the objective nor within the capacity of this paper to answer, or even broach, all these questions. I must admit that I am no media specialist or social scientist to provide any effective analysis and answers to these questions. In the following passages, I shall merely outline the history of the various forms of media used for transmitting Buddhism and briefly touch on the recent encounter of Bhutan's Buddhist tradition with the mass media.

Buddhism, as a system primarily oriented with principles and values rather than rituals and routines, is known to be flexible and adaptable to different methods of transmission and widely divergent social and cultural audiences. Methods of imparting and transmitting Buddhist doctrines, and the modes of its reception, have therefore been multifarious and constantly evolving. However, this is not to suggest that such flexibility in the modes of transmission happened at the expense of uninterrupted transmission. An uninterrupted transmission is of paramount importance in the Buddhist tradition.

In Vajrayāna Buddhism in particular, the authenticity of a tradition is mainly determined by its unbroken line of transmission and the authenticity of the tradition in turn ensured the effectiveness of the tradition as a correct path to enlightenment. Thus, continuity and purity of the transmission is fundamental to the sanctity, integrity, and efficacy of Vajrayāna teachings. Hence, it is primarily to ensure the continuity and efficacy of the teachings that modes of transmission changed according to circumstances.

I shall start my discussion of various methods of transmission with the concept of the three transmissions (*brgyud pa gsum*) in tantric Buddhism. It is an appropriate theme to invoke in order to kick off a discussion on media and Buddhism in a Vajrayāna Buddhist country like Bhutan, as it is a Vajrayāna concept which is popularly known among the rNying ma and bKa' brgyud traditions of Tibetan Buddhism.² These three transmissions represent graduated stages of conveying the ultimate experience of enlightenment realized by the Buddha from the Buddhas through advanced meditation adepts to the common people.

² These three transmissions, as three sequential stages of passing down the experience of enlightenment to the world, often form the framework for religious histories.

The Mind Transmission among the Buddhas (*rgyal ba dgongs pa'i brgyud pa*)

The state of the Buddha, according to Buddhist theories of Buddhahood, is qualified by an unobstructed and spontaneous knowledge of all phenomena. Omniscience is the mark of a fully enlightened being who has removed the veil of ignorance. The fully enlightened Buddhas are thus said to convene and communicate through a shared omniscient awareness. Enlightenment transcends all barriers of duality and differentiation so that the informed, informant, and the message are neither identical nor multiple, and the message is therefore considered to be 'conveyed' fully without a bipartite notion of the subject and object (*yul yul can gyi gnyis 'dzin*) or tripartite concept of agent, object and action (*bya byed las gsum gyi nam gzhas*). It is through such telepathic medium that the Buddhas are supposed to 'communicate and discourse' in the liberal sense of the words.

The Sign Transmission of the Knowledge Holders (*rig 'dzin brda yi brgyud pa*)

In comparison, the advanced saints and yogins, who have not yet obtained the omniscient insight of the Buddha, are said to adopt a symbolic language. They communicate with their audience through signs and tokens, which effectively illustrate the ineffable mystical experiences and concepts. Words are derived from discursive thinking. Hence, when empirical experiences, such as the awakening of the Buddha, are expressed in words, those words obfuscate the essential experience in the process of conceptualisation. The skilled masters therefore utilise signs and symbols as an unspoken language to convey the direct experience of enlightenment without verbal obfuscation. For instance, a crystal is considered much more effective in pointing the nature of the mind than an elaborate description, and the complexity and multiplicity of causation is better demonstrated by a peacock feather than a long sermon.

The Oral Transmission of the People (*gang zag snyan khung brgyud pa*)

This is the most conventional form of communication, and language is the main tool. Known as ‘the ear to ear transmission’, it is primarily verbal and auditory, and the message in this case is conveyed through linguistic transaction. It forms the basis of all secondary media such as the written and audio-visual forms. Although it is associated with the transmission from Vidhyadhara to common people, it is not limited to them. The Buddhas, enlightened adepts, and masters mostly teach in this medium.

The historical Buddha is recorded to have imparted his inner experience and wisdom to his disciples in this mode of communication using his melodious *Brahmaghoṣa* voice (*gsung tshangs pa'i dbyangs*). After the Buddha's *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, the Buddhist doctrine was compiled and transmitted orally through many generations of monks. The scriptures were recited, memorised, and retained in memory using various mnemonic tools. The Buddhist canon was passed down from master to disciple in this manner as an oral legacy until they were inscribed in written form several centuries later.

A significant testimony for the orality of the Buddhist canonical scriptures in those initial centuries of formation is one provided by the Buddhist canonizers in the formula ‘Thus have I heard’ (*evaṃ mayā śrutaṃ / 'di skad bdag gis thos pa*). The scriptures, the formula shows us, were all received orally. Even after the introduction of writing, the oral tradition continued as a primary medium for the transmission of Buddhist teachings. Buddhist scriptures are still committed to memory and a large portion of the meditation instructions are transmitted only orally and have never been written down. Today, the class of orally transmitted instructions, known as ‘ear transmission’ (*snyan brgyud*) constitute some of the most esoteric and powerful teachings. Similarly, oral methods such as authorization reading (*lung*) exposition (*'chad pa*) and debate (*rtsod pa*) dominate Himalayan Buddhist pedagogy and systems of examination. Thus, the Buddhist tradition is

still an oral tradition.

What keeps oral communication still strong and highly appealing despite the profuse development of more advanced and sophisticated forms of media? The reason, I suspect, is the intimacy, spontaneity, and therefore the effectiveness of oral transaction. All other forms of media involve some form and degree of mediation while oral communication is direct and personal. It is the most natural way of communicating, as it is the one to which we are most accustomed. It is the form of communication which is deeply seated in human psychological and behavioural tendency due to our habituation to it since childhood. This can be seen in our preference of telephone over email or other written media, and direct conversation and meeting over those on the telephone.

Although numerous media systems are at our disposal today to share and disseminate information, oral transaction is still very popular. It is a major and perhaps the most favoured conveyance for information. Hence, some modern mass media have effectively replicated the audio-visual qualities of oral communication. The television media to which our population is strongly attracted, for instance, is largely a mechanised extension of the oral practice, where speaker has much greater coverage and the audience remains distant and passive.

However, the main weakness of oral transmission is its instantaneous nature and spatio-temporal limitations. The teachings transmitted orally in the ancient days could not be sustained or duplicated as one can do today using modern devices. Thus, they were accessible only to the immediate audience, who used their mnemonic power to retain the information. The introduction of writing was a milestone in the history of mankind overcoming this problem. The writing of the Buddhist scriptures took the Buddhist message beyond the immediate audience of the oral transmission. The propagation of Buddhism opened a new chapter.

The first Buddhist scriptures are believed to have been written on palm leaves or inscribed on rocks during the Aśoka era in the 3rd century BC. However, the writing of a complete canon happened much later. The Pali canon of the

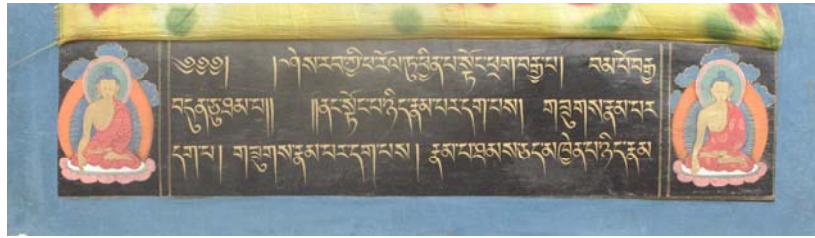
Theravada school is recorded to have been written on palm leaves only between 35-32 BC at the Aloka Cave in Srilanka. One may safely surmise that the scriptures of other *nikāyas* were also written down partially or fully around this period and the new literature, particularly Mahāyāna sūtras, emerging about this time mostly started as written compositions.

Writing has thus been not only an effective method of preserving and disseminating the existent scriptures but an expedient means of creating and distributing new works.

The introduction of writing, it seems, led to a drastic rise in the production of canonical literature in subsequent centuries. There was also an outburst of commentarial and exegetical works since the beginning of the first millennium.

By the time Buddhism reached Tibet in the middle of the 7th century, the *Sarvastivada* canon compounded with the Mahāyāna and early tantric writings comprised several scores of volumes, vastly outnumbering the earlier Buddhist canons. The invention of the Tibetan script by Thon mi Sambota, and the development of a written language in Tibet, facilitated the transmission of Buddhism from India to Tibet. The vast state-sponsored-project of translating Buddhism from Indic languages to Tibetan in the 8th and 9th centuries during the reign of Khri srong lDe btsan, Khri Ral pa can, et al. took place in the medium of a written language that was specially designed for the purpose.

Ever since, the art of writing has been a major medium for transmitting Buddhist teachings and for composing new religious literature. Tibet has been rated the highest country in per capita composition of books. Even after several centuries of the wide use of printing presses, a considerable percentage of the Himalayan literary heritage is hand written manuscripts and long hand writing is still the main method of literary creation.



Although the written media enhanced the preservation and dissemination of the Buddhist teachings by solidifying the rather ephemeral and immaterial oral transmissions, it was the introduction of the printing technology that revolutionized the dissemination of the Buddhist scriptures. Printing gave a new impetus to the propagation of Buddhist teachings.

The Far East Asian Buddhists were truly the pioneers in the art of printing. The earliest printed text known to survive is a sūtra on a single sheet dating around 750-51AD excavated from a stupa in Korea, although printing was already in practice in China for some time then. In 768, a million copies of a prayer book were said to have been printed, commissioned by the empress in Japan during the Nara period. However, the first clearly dated printed book is the Diamond Sūtra printed in 868 at the end of Tang period, now owned by the British Library.

The first printing of Tibetan books happened in the 13th century in the court of the Yuan dynasty in China. Sa skya

Paṅḍita's *sDom gsum rab dbye* and *Tshad ma rigs gter* were the first books to be printed, followed by a Kālacakra text, which was published to commemorate the demise of Kublai Khan. The first Tibetan canonical printing also took place in Beijing with the publication of Beijing *bKa' 'gyur* at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Xylographic printing in Tibet may have started at about the same time or soon after the printing of Tibetan books in China but it reached its height only in the 18th century with the creation of several collections of woodblocks for the Tibetan Buddhist canons. The first *bKa' 'gyur* to be printed in Tibet was the sNar thang xylographic *bKa' 'gyur* in 1731. This was followed by sDe dge, Co ne and lHa sa woodblocks for *bKa' 'gyur* and *bsTan 'gyur*. Much of the Tibetan literature was printed from woodblocks carved for them by the twentieth century.



Although the printing tradition took off in Asia much before the landmark achievement of Johann Gutenberg with his bible in 1456 in Europe, the practice was mostly limited to production of liturgical materials or literary and religious literatures. These printed texts substituted the manuscripts providing similar elegance but at less cost, much like incunabula of the early printing tradition in 15th century Europe. However, in contrast to Asia, the printing press in Europe assumed a much greater role with the mass publication of pamphlets and single sheets, most notably used for Luther's challenge of the Roman Catholic Church during the Reformation. The printed material, which were

produced relatively easily and in profusion, became tools in a war of propaganda and the 'press' acquired a new and significant meaning.

The new concept and role of the 'press' had major implications for the Christian religion. The press as an organ for mass production and distribution of propaganda, news and information turned out to be effective vehicle for fast and wide distribution of religious messages and discussion of religious issues. The story of mass media in the Buddhist Himalayas and its relationship with Buddhism however is a different one.

Until very recently, the majority of the Himalayan societies were illiterate and printing technologies remained traditional and primitive. There was no mass media system such as the 'press' in the Tibetan Buddhist countries. Newspapers came in significantly only in the later half of the twentieth century. Thus, the Tibetan Buddhist world did not go through the same history of gradual exposure to and use of mass media as the west. The press, and for that matter any form of mass media, is relatively new to the Himalayan world.

In Bhutan, the first newspaper started in the sixties but the second and third broad sheet newspapers have come out only in the last few months. TV and internet were introduced formally only in 1999 and the second radio station has started only recently. Thus, the encounter between Bhutan's religious and cultural tradition and the press is only beginning. The 'affair' between the press and Bhutan's Buddhist tradition is still in its inception, teeming with enthusiasm and excitement and requiring caution.

What is very significant and a little unnerving for Bhutan is that Bhutan's exposure to mass media is happening in a short period and an abrupt manner. Its media systems have developed in staggering leaps and bounds. With liberalization of media regulations, Bhutan is now confronted with the new newspapers, TV channels, radio stations, internet, and a growing movie industry. Moreover, the easy and spectacular form of media, TV in particular, is becoming popular and capturing the attention of most people. Bhutan is thus seeing a direct shift from an essentially oral society to one that is

predominantly audio-visual, skipping the literary phase. As a result, the once isolated and peaceful villages and monasteries are waking up to a new reality of life bombarded by endless news, propaganda, ads, and blogs.

There has been much talk about the impact of the sudden onslaught of mass media on the Bhutanese society both in Bhutan and abroad. Considerable research has been conducted on the impact of television alone and several papers at this conference discussed the issue of television's corrosive effect on the culture and religion of Bhutan. Many people express anxiety and misgiving that television, or more precisely the overwhelming external influence that creeps in through television, will deface Bhutan's cultural countenance and erode its unique identity.

Mass media such as television, however, is a mixed blessing and cannot be seen one-sidedly as either good or bad. Its introduction has certainly brought evident changes to the Bhutanese world view, their aims and aspirations, values and norms. It has consequently changed the outlook, attitude, and behaviours of the people in palpable ways. Several papers at the conference have demonstrated the negative impact on behaviour and lifestyle through numerous anecdotes and examples. A striking example pertaining to religious behaviour is the case of even old grannies postponing their evening prayers to watch Indian soap operas. For many, media entertainment has occupied the time which traditionally was spent on prayers and religious chores. Thus, mass media has proved to be a distraction inimical to spirituality.

Such behavioural changes are however not the most serious threat to Buddhist spirituality posed by mass media. They only indicate a deeper impact on people's psychology, which is more insidious and destructive than the felt affects on behaviour and lifestyle. Mass media is seen generally as materialistic and intended to flare people's desires and greed through endless advertisements, propaganda and other enticing programmes. It invigorates human vices such as craving, desire, and anger thus exacerbating the dissatisfactory nature of human existence.

Positive uses of mass media to promote Buddhist teachings have also been increasing although their impact is outweighed by the negative ones. Media has helped to make the Buddhist teachings more accessible, enjoyable and interactive through radio broadcasts, TV programmes, newspapers columns, and internet sites. A few people have even ventured to relay the Buddhist message through films. Furthermore, media technology is now being used to both digitally preserve religious scriptures and to reproduce and distribute them at a mass scale with little effort. Thus, media and media technology are both proving to be useful channels and tools for the furtherance of Buddhist spirituality.

It may therefore be argued in conclusion that (1) the media is on the whole a neutral tool, suitable for an educated use. It is neither good nor bad. It is the intention with which it is used and the purpose to which it is put to use that determine the moral value and benefit of the media. It is mainly a medium or vehicle for a message. (2) Direct restriction or suppression of mass media is therefore not necessary or recommendable. Many people argue that Bhutan should have kept TV out and controlled its media tightly. Such prohibition seems only to backfire, as is demonstrated by the recent ban of tobacco. Smoking appears to have increased and tobacco has now become very lucrative merchandise. The most realistic and sustainable solution to counteract the influence of media such as TV would be to kill the desire for it. This can be done through a process of devaluation by making it available cheaply and easily across all sections of the society. (3) Buddhism is a progressive religion, not a static system. Although its core principles like non-violence, compassion, and wisdom remain eternal, its methodologies and modalities have constantly evolved. Buddhist teachers and institutions should learn to adapt to the new social surrounding and fully exploit the mass media and media technologies to further the Buddha's teachings. The main question, therefore, is not what media will do to religion but what religion will do with media.

