

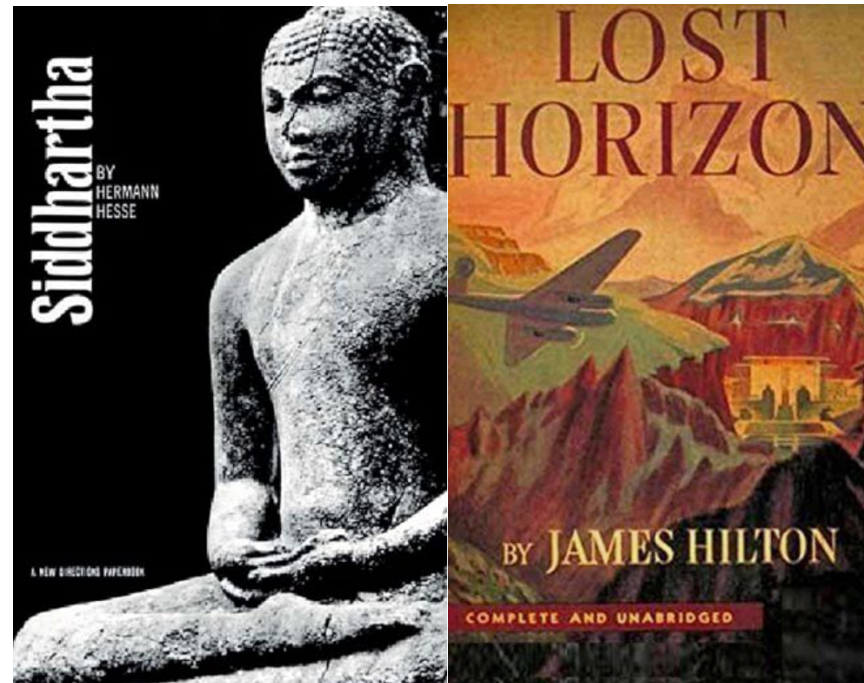
五十七

There were monks all about
wearing red robes with sashes
prostrating themselves
nearby incense and ashes
like a Buddhist golf course
18 halls at Labrang
reminded us softly
it was time to move on



Chapter 57 – Shadows of Tibet

In the late 60's and early 70's at the University of Montana, I read Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha and James Hilton's Lost Horizon. Curious to learn more about eastern religions, I waded through the Evans-Wentz translation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead and was fascinated when I found a road map describing what happens to a person during the 49 day period after death when a person can either become enlightened or begin their journey back to the land of the living in a new incarnation.

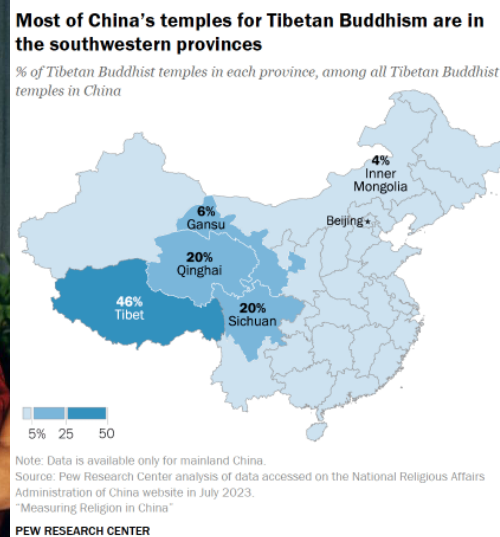


At that time I also learned about the 4 Noble Truths, and the 8-Fold Path in Buddhism. The 4 Noble Truths were

- All life is suffering
- Suffering is the result of desire
- Get rid of desire and you'll no longer suffer
- To end suffering, follow the 8-fold path

The 8-fold path included right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right concentration, and right mindfulness.

At the core of Buddhism is the doctrine of karma which is directly related to cause and effect. It teaches that you are responsible for every action you take and every word that you say and that all wrong words and actions need to be addressed and resolved. I later discovered that similar to other religions, not all Buddhists believe exactly the same things or practice in the same ways. There are two major branches of Buddhism. Mahayana (the greater vehicle) dedicates itself to the liberation of all sentient beings through a combination of compassion and wisdom. Theravada (the lesser vehicle) concerns itself with liberation of oneself.



Vajrayana Buddhism is often called the third branch of Buddhism, although it has its roots in Mahayana Buddhism. Also referred to as Esoteric Buddhism, this is certainly the root of what we call Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism is also heavily influenced by Bon, a traditional religion in Tibet before Buddhism was introduced in the 8th century CE. Tibetan Buddhism has spread beyond Tibet, however, and is currently practiced in Bhutan, Sikkim, Ladakh, and Mongolia. There are also large Tibetan Buddhist communities in Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai, Gansu, and in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

One unique aspect of Tibetan Buddhism is the Dalai Lama. Bodhisattvas are reincarnated holy people who have been reborn into the world for the specific purpose of helping all sentient beings. The Dalai Lama is believed to be the reincarnation of Avalokiteshvara or Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. The Dalai Lama's primary message is one of compassion and harmony.

Tibetan Buddhists believe that we live in a continuing cycle of birth and rebirth called samsara. They believe that the actions of this life (karma) will impact both this life and future lives. They also believe that the goal of Buddhism is to escape from this cycle of birth and rebirth by becoming enlightened. The spiritual teachers who help Buddhists navigate towards enlightenment (Nirvana) are called Lamas and Rinpoches (precious ones.) They teach their students activities that benefit all sentient beings and the environment since every living creature is believed to have an "energy" which differs from a permanent essence or "soul." Some Lamas and Rinpoches are Buddhist teachers or scholars while others are laypeople, often reincarnations of teachers from the past.

Tibetan Buddhists carry prayer beads and use them to count the times that they chant mantras (short prayers) to help them connect with enlightened beings or Buddhas. The most popular chant, "Om Mani Padme Hum" is not only heard but seen, all over the Buddhist world. It is commonly translated as "the jewel in the lotus" but is meant to direct one's focus to attaining the level of compassion and wisdom that Bodhisattvas have reached. Not for the purpose of achieving enlightenment but rather to direct one's actions towards others. In Tibetan Buddhism, symbols are pervasive. Whether prayer wheels, mandalas, prayer flags, or on shrines made of stones, on walls, on tapestries, prayers, and mantras are meant to be shared with all sentient beings. They're not limited to the interiors of monasteries or the homes of practitioners. Like thousands of tiny prayer flags, they flap in the wind spreading and sharing their messages.

There is a breadth and depth to Tibetan Buddhism, I could not begin to unearth (or understand) at this writing. A huge number of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, supernatural beings and spirits (many not from Buddhism) abound in writing, on paintings, mandalas, tapestries, on prayer wheels, sand art, prayer flags, and in a wealth of tantras of all sorts.

The final image that comes to my mind is that wherever Tibetan Buddhism is practiced, people pray by prostrating themselves to show respect to the Buddha, the Dharma, or the Sangha. This act is also done to humble oneself and to release one's ego.