



Tibetan Buddhist Traditions in the Eastern Himalaya: Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim

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Abstract

The eastern Himalayan region covering Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Sikkim represents a unique cultural union where Tibetan Buddhist traditions have flourished for centuries, creating diverse regional variations while keeping core philosophical foundations. This study examines the historical development, institutional structures, and contemporary practices of Tibetan Buddhism across these three regions. The study finds the migration patterns of Tibetan communities and spiritual practitioners who established monasteries, teaching centers, and cultural institutions throughout the region. Darjeeling's transformation from a colonial hill station to a center of Tibetan Buddhist learning, Kalimpong's role as a crucial trade route facilitating cultural exchange, and Sikkim's position as a predominantly Buddhist kingdom provides diverse contexts for understanding how Tibetan traditions adapted to local environment. The study highlights how major Buddhist traditions including Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug schools established distinct presences in each region, often influenced by patronage patterns, geographical accessibility, and political circumstances. The study examines the integration of indigenous practices, the development of assimilated ritual and traditions. Contemporary challenges including modernization, tourism, political changes, and generational shifts are examined alongside preservation efforts and adaptation plans. The research reveals how these eastern Himalayan communities have maintained spiritual authenticity while engaging with globalization, serving as vital links between traditional Tibetan Buddhist culture and modern secular contexts. This regional analysis contributes to broader understanding of Buddhist migration communities and cultural resilience in transnational spiritual development.

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Introduction

The term Buddhism is often confused by most as just another religion, which was founded by Prince Siddhartha, born in Lumbini to King Śudhodhana and queen Mahāmāyā who later renounced his royalty and wore the attire of a simple monk, he later found the way to achieve enlightenment and was crowned with the title of the Buddha. This version of explanation for the introduction of Buddhism has many takers and most believe that being a monk and following a simple life along the path of the Buddha is Buddhism. However, in reality Buddhism is a way to practice reaching the ultimate goal, to the find the truth that one wants to conquer in this materialist life. The answers to impermanence and the guide to complete this life circles other tone may be at peace with one's own body and mind leaving aside the ignorance is an actual term for Buddhism. According to Prāsaṅgika School ignorance is the misconception that phenomena inherently exist (Tsongkhapa). In much simpler terms it is the way of life which one may choose to follow after practicing its path to achieve complete tranquility in regards to the body, speech and mind of every sentient being only if he or she wishes to follow. Again, Buddhism can broadly be divided into two major branches represented by two schools i.e. the Hinayana and the Mahayana traditions. (Suzuki) The followers of Hinayana seek self-liberation (*Nirvana*) whereas the later practice to achieve Nirvana as well as infinite happiness for all sentient beings. The preconceived notion that is assumed for the term Buddhism is that it is a cult or followers of a particular religious beliefs, traditions, and customs confined to a particular area, boundary or segregated areas. In reality, the term Buddhism refers to a vast community of people spread across the world who study and practice the principles and traditions associated with Buddhist teachings. These practices help individuals lead meaningful lives while promoting compassion and well-being for all sentient beings.

The roof of the world as we know of today, Tibet is no stranger to this form of Buddhism. The Tibetan Buddhism and their followers classify themselves as the Mahayanists following the path of Mahayana tradition. The form of Buddhism that was nurtured then passed on to the rest of the world is what we call today as the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. One might assume that since it was confined to Tibet due to its geographical location it was created in Tibet and hence the term, but historical evidences has proved that the origination of this unique form of Buddhism has its roots embedded in the land of intellectuals, India (Chattopadhyaya and Chimpā 1-8). Had it not been for the efforts of eminent masters such as Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla, and Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna, who undertook the task of teaching and propagating the ancient Nālandā traditions in the Land of Snow, these traditions would today be mere fables for our bedtime stories. In the sacred scriptures that were translated into Tibetan and shielded in various monasteries around Tibet, which we were later brought back to India after the occupation of Tibet by the Peoples Republic of China add to the survival of Nalanda traditions which today can only be found in Tibetan Buddhist texts and scriptures. Such ancient knowledge which took years of research with numerous intellectuals and their precious time, effort, and eventually their lives are inscribed in these precious texts written in the Tibetan script which also happens to have its emergence from the Sanskrit vocabulary. As it stands today the people of Tibet who have been residing in India with the generosity from the Indian people it may be rightly said that Tibetan Buddhism has found solace in resting its ground from the very land which helped it originate and prosper, India. The sheer passion, determination, and belief possessed by Indian saints who took the tremendous effort to

translate this ancient valuable knowledge and passed it to the Tibetan people to practice and flourish, speaks volumes about the importance of Buddhism and Buddhist Studies.

Four Schools of Tibetan Buddhism

The Tibetan Buddhism has four major schools which can be classified as: Nyingma School: Known as the Old School, they follow the tradition introduced by great Indian pundits like Śāntarakṣita and Guru Padmasambhava who gave spiritual transmission of the inner Tantras during the reign of King Trisong Detsen (Bhutia 21). Kagyud School: Also known as oral tradition, this form of teachings primary emphasis on meditation practices established by the great Siddha Tilopa known as Prajñabhadra (Bhutia 23). Sakya School: The Sakya School was likewise established during the eleventh century. It derives its name from the Sakya Monastery in western Tibet, which was founded by Khon Konchok Gyalpo. This school is renowned for preserving both the scholarly traditions and the oral teachings (Bhutia 23). Gelug School: This school rose with the greater former Tsongkhapa who is also credited with the establishment of modern age of Tibetan Buddhism. He established a strong order of Buddhist monks. Today this school is known for its application of logic and debate as its form of learning (Bhutia 29).

Historical Transmission to the Eastern Himalayas

Tibet being in close proximity to the Eastern Himalayan region specially Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong the influence of Tibetan Buddhism can be witnessed in these regions. The history behind the connection of these regions can be dated much earlier where the Sikkimese version of the three renowned monks who came from the forbidden kingdom of Tibet eventually proclaimed and fulfilled the prophecy of bestowing upon Sikkim the first Chogyal (Raja/ King) marks the entry of Tibetan Buddhism in the region (Mullard 44-52). The opening of trade through the *Jelep La Pass* into Tibet, via the most convenient route through *Kalimpong*, along with Colonel Younghusband's expedition, further facilitated not only commercial exchange but also the influx of religious teachings and scholarly materials, which can be witnessed even today in the form of monastic studies, monasteries, traditions, and cultural practices followed in the region beyond Tibet.

The treaty of *Titaliya* between the Raja of Sikkim and East India Company of 1817, followed by the deed of grant given to the British by the Raja of Sikkim in 1835 divided the once influential Tibetan Buddhist region to the present-day form in terms of study and practice is concerned (O'Malley 21-25). The prevalence of Bon tradition or pre-Buddhist religion (*Chattopadhyaya* and *Chimpa* 165-172) prior to the coming of Tibetan Buddhism was evident in Tibet and the same can be said about present day Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong which can be reflected in the ethnic, indigenous tribal community such as the Lepchas or the Mutanchi Rongkup as they prefer themselves to be called. The advent of Tibetan Buddhism into these regions, from Tibet especially with the learned monks via Sikkim, makes history repeat itself where the same can be related to Tibet where once great masters from India visited Tibet to teach Buddhism. So, one can safely say that the Indian form of Buddhism had made its introduction with a different mark known commonly as Tibetan form of Buddhism into the lands we now refer to as Eastern Himalayan region namely Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong.

Tea Plantation, Environmental Change, and Colonial Education

The introduction of Tea in the then Darjeeling District by Arthur D. Campbell in 1856 at Aloobari and Lebong where it was first introduced changed the course of history in terms of study and towards the extent of Tibetan Buddhism was concerned. With the coming of Europeans and their interest in the region brought along their customs and traditions along with their religion. By the year 1874 Darjeeling had over 113 tea gardens which covered over 18,888 acres of cultivation land including cleared forest areas (De). Bon religion which was amalgamated with the Tibetan Buddhism tradition could not survive the deforestation, which it depended so largely upon for its rituals and traditions eventually it led to its miniature status in terms of the numbers of followers. With the Europeans came modern thoughts in the form of European mode of schooling which is followed even today to some extent, this technique of teachings was made available to all classes of society without distinguishing between any class, creed or gender. Prior to the introduction of European form of schooling the education system was concerned around monasteries and in the hands of learned monks who could not cater to the common masses in a larger aspect due to constraints of time and other monastic, spiritual responsibilities. The oldest monastery in Darjeeling could be the one that stood on the Observatory Hill, and in Sikkim it was perhaps the Dubdi monastery. Some scholars describe Buddhism in the Eastern Himalayan region as pure Lamaism, wherein the monastery functions as the central axis of community life. In this context, if the aforementioned considerations are taken into account, certain parallels may be drawn with Brahmanism, as the earliest known saints who propagated Buddhism can be traced to Indian-origin pundits.

Colonial Education and Missionary Schools in the Eastern Himalayas

As more and more Europeans settled in Darjeeling the need for schools for their children increased as such educational institutions emerged in Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong where people from Sikkim also took interest to learn the European methods of study. But unlike Tibetan Buddhism the European modes and methods did not take into consideration the local ethnic aspects. Their teachings were centralized with the European methods not in consideration of spiritual aspects it was considered as factories for making clerks and government servants stated/noted by Mahatma Gandhi on schools and colleges of European standards prevalent during the British administration. But unlike Buddhism or Buddhist studies centers such as the monastic schools, the European Missionaries made schooling available to the masses in huge numbers and to this the creditability should be made to the missionaries. Some of the earliest schools that were established are Loreto Convent for Girls established in 1846, St. Paul's School in 1868, Victoria School in Kurseong in 1898, St. Joseph's School in 1888, Mount Hermon School in 1895, St. Andrews

Colonial Homes/ Dr. Grahams Homes in 1900 were some of the institutions which still render valuable education to the children of the Eastern Himalayan region and to far off places (De). Creating leaders, and improving society in general from their years of experience and teachings.

Tibetan Buddhism and the Preservation of Monastic Learning

The influx of Tibetan Refugees after the annexation of Tibet by the Peoples Republic of China in the year 1959 saw the number of Tibetans rise in the Eastern Himalayan Region. The cordial welcome and refuge extended by the people of India have further contributed to the preservation of this ancient tradition and its practitioners, who have found renewed hope in its continued survival. This Mahāyāna tradition, commonly so designated, constitutes an integral component of the intellectual heritage of the ancient Nālandā Mahāvihāra. There is no denying that Tibetan influence in Sikkim both spiritual and at certain times administrative consultations were rendered from the palace at Lhasa, there are instances where the Chögyal (Historically, the title Chögyal was used for kings who were both political and religious leaders. This was common in places where Tibetan Buddhism was important, like Tibet, Bhutan, and Sikkim) had abdicated his throne and had left Sikkim to seek refuge in Tibet where he learnt and mastered the art of astrology only to be crowned once again with the help of the spiritual and political head of Tibet. As a result, the bond, relationship, and through this constant interaction between Tibet and Eastern Himalayan region there did exist the influence of the mightier country being Tibet on its neighboring regions in this case Sikkim, Darjeeling and Kalimpong. The existence of monasteries in the above three mentioned regions have its direct relation to either of the earlier explained Tibetan schools namely the Nyingma School, Kagyud School, Sakya School, or the Gelug School.

The populations who are either Tibetan by birth or Buddhist by faith in the three regions of Eastern Himalaya also belong to any of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Much importance is given to monastic teachings since these institutions were earmarked for safe keeping of religious texts which are mostly of Nalanda School of education translated in Tibetan by the masters of Nalanda with the help of Tibetan masters. Not only are the texts considered sacred which hold the key to a fruitful life, they are revered as most important in leading a monastic life as well. The teachings of great Śākyamuni or most commonly known as the Buddha the great prince Siddhartha Gautama, are written in these texts known as Kangyur and Tengyur (The Kangyur and Tengyur are the two main sections of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon. The Kangyur holds the recorded teachings of the Buddha, while the Tengyur contains commentaries and writings by renowned Buddhist masters. The Kangyur consists of 108 volumes, and the Tengyur has 225 volumes) are kept safely in the monasteries. The reprinting of these texts has taken place as younger monasteries are being constructed for the easy accessibility of Buddha's teachings to the masses so that it becomes easy for more people to live their lives and overcome obstacles in the simplest form.

Historical Challenges and Revival of Tibetan Buddhism

he Tibetan Buddhism is not devoid of obstacles, in Tibet under the king Lang- Dar- Mar (Also known as Langdarma Udmutsen, the last king of Tibet, ruled from 838 to 842 AD before being assassinated by Lhalung Palgyi Dorje. He is said to have two sons, Tridé Yumten and Namdé Ösung. His grandson, King Yeshe Ö, was instrumental in reviving Buddhism after the fall of the Tibetan Empire) (Bhutia 12). Buddhism was opposed and to such an extent that persecution was faced by the preachers and teachers of Buddhism. Soon after the fall of this irreligious king, Buddhism flourished once again even

more than it had ever before. Buddhist canonical texts are very vast and cannot be explained in a single volume, much of these texts are translated from ancient Pali and Sanskrit scripts. The ancient period witnessed great many Buddhist institutions as mentioned earlier Nalanda University and Vikramśilā University were the main institutions for Buddhist studies which had their own methods/ styles of teaching. With the teachings of different scholars from different Universities at different times in Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism too split into four schools as mentioned earlier. The four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism flourished in Tibet despite the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959.

Many Tibetans fled to India, Bhutan, and Nepal after the invasion, yet Buddhism survived in Tibet along with the Tibetan population many Tibetan Masters also relocated to neighboring countries which led to the spread of Dharma and preservation of their culture. As of today, many Tibetans who fled from Tibet have settled in regions of Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong and are still following the old school of Tibetan Buddhism yet the younger generations have acculturated due to their integration with other communities, have evolved Buddhism with the incorporation of customs and traditions from these communities and religions. Thus, we can find the Tibetan Buddhism in some regions very accommodating to the local population while keeping the core values intact at the same time being flexible in customs and traditions for the majority of population to understand and incorporate this form of study.

Mahayana and Vajrayana Traditions, Ritual Practices, and Linguistic Heritage

A distinctive form of Tibetan Buddhism tradition that was introduced in Tibet by Indian masters were Mahayana form of teachings which emphasizes on compassion, altruism, and help for others whereas the other form of teachings which can be found in Tibetan Buddhism is the Vajrayāna form of teachings which uses different skillful methods to attain profound realization. For the people following Tibetan Buddhism in Eastern Himalayan region practice of religious customs and traditions has become an essential part of everyday life. Offering of water is one of the main traditional practices of Tibetan Buddhism practiced in all monasteries and households to accumulate merits and to purify negative actions including prostration to all Buddha's.

The offering of butter lamps signifies elimination of darkness of delusion. Another common practice among the Buddhist families is to hoist prayer flags this is done with the intention of bringing good luck/ fortune. The Buddhist believes that spinning of prayer wheel in clockwise direction will accumulate equal merits as recitation of prayers as such the use of prayer wheel. The language spoken by the Tibetans is said to be of Tibeto-Burman language and is used by the Tibetans residing in Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong as well the Tibetan script which has its origination in the Gupta Script. Many other scripts and languages resemble the Tibetan script/ language such as the similarity with the Sikkimese script and language or the Bhutia language, the languages of Sherpas, and Tamangs, the Lepcha scripts also believed to have been inspired by the Tibetan language. Linguistically the languages of the Tamangs, Sherpas, Lepchas, Bhutias, and Tibetans is common the only thing that gives them a distinguish feature is the tone and pronunciation that differ from one another's language.

Conclusion

The term Tibetan Buddhist tradition if deeply researched, practiced and understood the conclusion to its existence in Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong can be narrated in volumes but the fact would remain that this form of study would eventually benefit society, and all that has its purpose of existence. Today the region of Easter Himalayan as mentioned which is regarding the three geographical extent it covers, one may find the peaceful coexistence of all religious practices where Hinduism or Brahmanism, Christianity, Islam, Animist, Buddhism all have remained with their own traditional practices without anyone of the other infringing on the other's customs and traditions. Moreover, each of the above religions have adopted, assimilated, and evolved today to benefit the society as a whole. The most peaceful relation that may be visible to the public in general is the situation of the present-day Observatory Hill, where there exists a cordial respect for both Hinduism and Buddhism and both coexist in harmony providing spiritual benefits to all sentient beings.

As far as Tibetan Buddhism is concerned it is a way of leading a life of one's own choice, to which one needs to understand the surroundings we are in, in which we coexist, the history with its formation to what extent the study can be practiced, and what benefits it can be put in use for. If a follower of Tibetan Buddhism wishes out of his/her own free will to practice then perceive the study of Buddhism, the picture and the conclusion for the life we live could be better understood. There would be a greater cause of the effects of practicing the Tibetan form of Buddhism; the mere picture that our eyes make us conclude to the subject matter at hand can be disregarded after careful practice of the Tibetan form of Buddhism. With as much information that our mind can relate to the study of Buddhism, with its practice one can elaborate and clear the perception that one may have preconceived regarding Buddhism or the Tibetan form of Buddhism.

To have an accurate and precise narration of any subject matter is beyond the limitations of a single scholar, researcher, or scientist. The perception of one may differ to the conclusion of another as such we must give due respect and tolerate each and every persons concept of having their opinion on any subject matter but at the same time it becomes our responsibility as scholars to narrate, foretell with evidences and leave it to the audience of various sections of society to ponder upon the findings and then come to their own individual conclusions.

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