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Discussions and Critical Notes

On Face Masks as Buddhist Merit: Buddhist Responses to COVID-19. *A Case Study of Tibetan Buddhism in Shanghai*

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The global media has reported various institutional responses of Buddhism to COVID-19. This paper offers a look at the grassroots of Buddhist religious activity in response to the pandemic, examining its impact on lay Buddhist followers of the Nyingmapa Buddhist tradition in Shanghai. The paper relates the activity of this group of lay adepts vis-à-vis COVID-19 to the material characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism, and how they manifest in the Han Chinese urban environment. Exploring the concept of merit, the paper argues how religious responses to the pandemic act as components in contemporary Chinas' Ritual Economy.

Keywords: Religion and COVID-19, Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhist Merit, Ritual Economy

In mid-April, I began reaching out about this issue to Buddhist practitioners, whom I have been researching since 2017.[1] I wanted to know how they were dealing with the onset of COVID-19 in Shanghai, how adjusting to the call for self-restraint was affecting them, and what kinds of ritual responses their master was devising. The devotees, I learned, had turned to their teacher for explanations of the pandemic. In an interview, one of my informants from Shanghai related the following message from her teacher, Longyou 隆有 (April 2020):

> The outlook of Buddhism on the virus is that it is a disaster which was most likely triggered by the *greed* of life. . .

In further recordings that the teacher circulated among these adepts, he instructed them to chant the sutra of compassion (大悲咒 *dabeizhou*) as well as to pray for peace for the world. Additionally, he explained that the five poisons (五毒 *wudu*) were taking strong hold, and that prayers were

[1] This research is based on an analysis of field research conducted in China on lay groups. The fieldwork was conducted in 2017 and 2018, and recently in April-May 2020. The fieldwork combined interviews with participant observation, as well as interviews conducted through WeChat. A further significant type of source used is ongoing digital research on the group's social media accounts conducted from 2017 until 2020.

necessary to balance their overwhelming power.[2] This is the sort of response we are witnessing throughout the Buddhist world.[3] As the devotees in this study operate in the urban environment of Shanghai, they had to adhere to the different local regulations regarding social gathering and travel restrictions.[4] The members of the group are Han Chinese practitioners of the Nyingmapa (宁玛派 *ningmapai*)[5] school of Tibetan Buddhism.[6] Normally, they make a spring pilgrimage (朝圣者 *chaoshanzhe*)to the mountainous area of Sêrtar (色达 *Seda*) to pay tribute to the holy Tibetan mountains and visit their teacher. This year the trip was postponed for fear that police would not allow entrance to the region. Adjustments were made in the devotees' everyday practice as well. For the first few months of the pandemic, the group cancelled its chanting and study sessions (修共 *xiugong*), during which perhaps forty devotees sit knee-to-knee in the practice hall. Nonetheless, they continued to practice a daily routine on their own, including prostrations, chanting, and the reading of scripture. As one of the devotees told me in an interview in 2019, "cultivation is done in solitude" (修行是孤独的 *xiuxing shi gudu de*), explaining that while the group is there to provide support, the core of the process—at any time—is personal. However, they continued to maintain contact with their teacher. Han lay devotees from eastern cities and their Tibetan teachers in Sichuan or Tibet maintain their relationships through different cyber modalities of communication (Terrone 2012: 107).[7] Thus, the means of communication used by Tibetan teachers with their Han devotees have developed in a way that allows for adaptation even to the current conditions of social distancing.[8]

In addition to seeking theological explanations for the disaster and adjusting their prayers and rituals to accommodate the situation, the group members showed a third response to COVID-19, one

[2] Greed (贪欲 *tanyu*) is one of the five poisons (五毒 *wudu*), according to Mahayana.

[3] For example, the Dalai Lama, who is not from the Nyingmapa linage but represents an authority when it comes to Vajrayāna Buddhism, had urged practitioners to chant mantras to the Boddhisatva Tara, associated with compassion and well-being, in order to gain protection. He emphasized that this pandemic calls for meditation, compassion, generosity, and gratitude (Salguero 2020).

[4] Shanghai did not experience a lockdown that included residents remaining in their homes. Nonetheless, from the moment Wuhan went on lockdown, most people in Shanghai stayed indoors, neighborhoods issued special exit passes, and some neighborhoods restricted the number of house-exits.

[5] For more about Nyingma Buddhism, see Palden, Tsewang, Helm, and White (2010). Also see Bdud- 'joms 'Jigs-bral-ye-śes-rdo-rje, Kapstein and Gyurme Dorje (1991).

[6] They are all adepts of a teacher by the name of Longyou 隆有, who resides in Sichuan province. Longyou was trained at the Five Sciences Buddhist Academy (Larong wunming fojiao xueyuan 喇荣五明佛教学院) and lives adjacent to the academy. It is situated in Larung Valley in Sertar County. Following the Academy's rapid growth in the late nineties, the Chinese regime demolished parts of it in 2001. Since then, the Academy has been a politically contested area that is periodically strongly guarded and even closed to foreigners.

[7] Buddhist teachers gather around themselves hundreds and sometimes thousands of disciples, often through the use of modern technology. Teachers send texts, advice, initiations of chants and personal practice curriculum to their followers. In some cases, even refuge-taking can be done through social media with a mediator who is already a member of the group (personal correspondence, 2019). For more on Buddhism and cyber modalities, see Zhang 2017, Campbell (2013), Travagin (2019).

[8] Currently, the followers receive ongoing guidance on their practice through Wechat and recorded lectures. They receive different forms of support and guidance on how to maintain their practice in current times, both individually (according to each practitioner's personal progress) and on the level of the global disaster.

structured around entrepreneurship and face masks. In early March, the group had begun to make face masks from natural materials and sell them online. In the first few months of the pandemic, there was a significant local and global shortage of face masks, which are used to prevent the spread of the virus. When the acute need for face masks became apparent, different Buddhist organizations dedicated their resources to buying and manufacturing masks.[9] Alongside these donations, which aimed to address the shortage of masks, many individuals and firms identified a business opportunity. The decision of the group under study to manufacture face masks is consonant with their overall entrepreneurial orientation. Alongside their religious practice, the group holds a product brand under their name, producing fire-burned tea ware (乐烧 *leshao*) and specially grown local tea, as well as high-quality designer apparel. Their studio spaces and practicing halls are scattered throughout Shanghai, and also serve as shops in which they sell their products.[10] Observing these two approaches of the lay Buddhists taken in this study, I ask whether they show a contradiction in their approach to the pandemic. On the one hand, their teacher has explained the pandemic in terms of human greed (贪欲 *tanyu*); on the other, the group has seized a business opportunity which arose in the shadow of a national and global crisis. These different aspects of the response lead to questions about the congruity of the religious phenomenon. Buddhism views greed as an attachment to material wants, and an obstacle to clarity and thus enlightenment. As such, it calls for renunciation of the physical world. How are the profits derived from the manufacture and sale of face masks (especially in times of shortage) reconciled with the Buddhist account of the pandemic and call for worldly renunciation? Is this act considered "good" from the perspective of karma (因果 *yinguo*)?

According to John Kieschnick, Buddhism attacked the material world with extensive intellectual rigor (2003: 2).[11] The influence of Buddhism on material culture in China is a not a cut-and-dry issue, explains Kieschnick (2003: 3):

> Objects, ideas about objects and behaviors associated with objects came with Buddhism to China where they have continued to change and evolve in response to new environments and the demands of a *dynamic* society with an immense capacity to manufacture employ, and discard material things.

[9] One example from the Chinese Buddhist world is the Taiwan-based Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (慈濟基金會 *ciji jijin hui*), which donated masks to critical organizations (Whitaker 2020). In the past, the Tzu Chi foundation had carried out international relief missions beyond the borders of Taiwan, where the organization is based (Madsen 2007, 36–37). For more about Tzu Chi, see Yao (2012).

[10] The brand also has an online store which makes their products available nationwide. More specifically, the brand designs are specifically connected to Tibetan Buddhist soteriologies. The clothing line is designed in traditional style (禅衣 *chanyi*) aside from Tibetan Buddhist prayer beads (藏传佛教佛珠 *zangchuan fojiao fozhu*). Some of the tea ware such as cups and pots contain prints and engravings of the Tibetan eight auspicious symbols of good fortune such as The Parasol, which stands as a sign of spiritual power, and The Treasure Vase—the form of the treasure vase is a sign of the fulfilment of spiritual and material wishes and is also an attribute of particular deities who are connected with wealth.

[11] In many scriptural passages, the Buddha warns that the pursuit of material things is not simply a distraction from purer concerns; it is short-sighted, because in the long term one is not rewarded for accumulating personal possession. For the different passages and further discussion, see Kieschnick (2003).

A full discussion of the place of materiality in Chinese Buddhism is beyond the scope of this note. Nevertheless, examining the trajectory of Tibetan Buddhism in contemporary China reveals this dynamic relationship between materiality and spirituality in Buddhist practice. Tibetan Buddhism is often perceived (especially in the West) as a refined spiritual discipline, a world of subtle philosophy and powerful meditation techniques that induce insight and compassion for all. However, this representation is rooted in an image crafted by the religion for itself over the course of centuries, an image which does not encompass all aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. For Tibetans, explains Matthew Kapstein, the objectives of religious life are concrete and grounded. They undertake meritorious rites and avoid bad karma in order to be protected and rewarded, not necessarily to achieve spiritual enlightenment (Kapstein 2014: 3). Moreover, esoteric practices, which comprise a large part of Nyingmapa Buddhism, offer not only spiritual merchandise but also material prosperity and wealth (Yü 2012). These concrete objectives for lay people can be achieved by working with professional masters in exchange for money or gifts.

Figure 1: Face masks sold by the group. (Photo by the author.)

Accordingly, in the case of Chinese netizens' religious consumption of Tibetan Buddhism, the presence of money is overwhelming (Yü 2012: 111). One element in the trajectory of money and Tibetan Buddhism in China is that material things, namely money and gifts, are used by Han Chinese to obtain teachings, initiations, and spells. While technology is making all of these increasingly available, the practice still demands more than a visit to the nearest city temple. And so, the appearance of materialism in the worship of Chinese individuals is manifested in their support in *gurus, tulkus*, and monastic communities in Tibet (Caple 2015: 464). Another factor in the trajectory of materiality in Tibetan Buddhism is that its emergence and proliferation in the religious landscape of contemporary Han China parallels China's development into an economy characterized by the privatization of state resources and strong global economic involvement. Especially since the turn of the twentieth century, Han Chinese Buddhists have been the primary financial source for cross-

regional teaching activities (Yü 2012: 100). Dan S. Yü draws on David Harvey's critical analysis of neoliberal economic behavior in China to denote a process of 'creative destruction' in Tibetan Buddhism (Yü 2012: 100). In this dynamic process, traditional forms of Tibetan Buddhism are destroyed while the market creates new opportunities for the religion to flourish. He suggests that market-sustained access to religious teachings and practice is causing religions, Tibetan Buddhism among them, to be transformed into objects of consumption (Harvey 2007). As Kieschnick notes, this transformation might not be unique to our times, but is rather an ongoing process propelled by the influence of Buddhism on Chinese material culture, dating back to the first century CE (Kieschnick 2003: 1).

Apart from the impact of these economic and cultural factors on the Buddhist economy in question, the intrinsic concept which underlies the economic exchange networks of Tibetan Buddhism in Han China is *merit* (功德 *gongde*).[12] I agree with Brooke Schedneck that in examining Buddhism and its economic dynamics, focus should be placed on the economy of merit, particularly from an emic perspective (Schedneck 2019: 32). Walsh has argued that merit is the defining social mechanism of Buddhism in China (2007).[13] From the perspective of lay Buddhists, these material exchanges are considered an accumulation of merit. Their ability to financially support the monastic community serves both their patronage to this community and their individual spiritual development. For some groups, such as the one discussed here, the abundant cash flow comes not only from personal wealth but also from business activities. As opposed to institutionalized monasteries and temples and the lay people which surround them, urban China today is full of Han Chinese groups who practice Tibetan Buddhism in a less formal manner. Due to the severe restrictions on religion in China, the new native religious groups in China began to strategically dodge political control by presenting themselves in alternative forms (Ji 2008: 256).[14] My current ongoing study of such groups reveals that Han Chinese adepts of Tibetan Buddhism often disguise their religious affiliations as business operations. Chau refers to such acts as "creative dissimulation" (Chau 2011: 6–7). I argue that some of these businesses are not only a "front," but rather part of the Buddhist spiritual economy of the group of devotees.

Lay Tibetan Buddhists maintains their active engagement in spreading their doctrines and Buddhist worldviews and producing an expanding economy of experiences and objects that hold "efficacy" (靈 *ling*). "There is no doubt that some kind of enchantment is the goal of advertising and that many people in rich societies are caught up with consuming" (Bennett 2001: 199). However, as opposed to Harvey's critique on the commodification of Tibetan Buddhism (as I presented here above), I hold that "commodity enchantment" can be understood as a socially and spiritually dynamic

[12] By "the economic network" I refer to all the actors involved in exchanges related to the activities, namely: the teacher, the adepts, and the customers who purchase goods from the adepts (some Buddhist followers and some not), as well as the property owners of the facilities, etc.

[13] A full discussion of Buddhism and merit is beyond the scope of this short article. For various approaches to merit in Buddhism, see Schedneck 2019; Walsh 2007; Osto 2016.

[14] A discussion of religious regulation is too broad for the scope of this article. See Leung 2018, 2005; Dubois 2017, 2018; Yang 2012; Ashiwa and Wank 2009.

process of different actors of the discussed economy. Marx had explained the power which commodities hold in society as the idolatry of consumption goods. Marx condemns this as "Commodity fetishism." According to him, humans become blind to the pain and suffering embedded in the commodity by virtue of an unjust and exploitative system of production, even as commodities—mere things—appear as active agents capable of commanding attention and determining desire. He claims that when commodification "animates" mere artifacts, it also enervates their producers and consumers (Marx 1990: 126). Jane Bennett is among recent scholarship to argue against this notion of Marx. She argues that the theme of commodity fetishism is not capacious enough to account for our fascination with commercial goods. Accordingly, she searches for a phenomenology of consumption, "which focuses on the sense of vitality, the charged-up feeling often generated in human bodies by the presence or promise of commodity consumption" (Bennett 2001: 204). According to Bennet, this Marxist notion of commodities is born out of outrage on a dominating system with pervasive power, which they strive to inflame opposition to. "While this image of power can indeed provoke political resistance to commodity culture and promote a more self-conscious relationship to it, there is also a way in which it works against that goal—why should one bother to criticize what is inevitable or challenge what is omnipotent?" (Bennett 2001: 205). I agree with Bennett that a focus should be put on the form of commodification, not the fact of it. The commodification of objects and the enchanted actors who consume them can also suggest a subversion to other entities within society.

In this framework, the devotees in this case study create a "language of the invention with which radical groups can think about, refine, and ultimately advertise their ideologies" (McCracken 1988: xv). Creating a network of spaces and commodities that express their religious beliefs, lay Tibetan Buddhists react to the states' acts to control the influence of Buddhism in Chinese society. The structure enables them to avoid taking a full part in Buddhism's general institutionalization process in China (Ji 2008) and avoid obeying the religious regulations of the state in creative ways. In that sense, the enchantment of commodities works as a creative power structure that reacts to state power. "Commodity culture both expresses and exposes a social disorder that would otherwise remain hidden" (Abbas 1996: 291–292). In the case of the Shanghai-based group under study, the earnings from their brand are used to maintain private worship halls, support the teacher and receive his blessings and rituals, and further their devotional activities.

As mentioned by Wilson in his article in the latest special issue of *Journal of Global Buddhism*, "Buddhist activities have always been costly. And by definition the lineages that have survived up to the modern day are those that successfully established sufficient funding for their needs" (Wilson 2019: 89). Regarding the teleology of Tibetan Buddhism in China in the past decades, it is no longer born of an exclusively soteriological orientation; instead, it is infused with the teleology of the market—that is, maximization of profit through the exchange of commodities (Yü 2012). I suggest that this contemporary trajectory of the practice does not undermine the fundamental principles of the tradition. In the Nyingmapa Buddhist worldview, the spiritual and the material are not independent of each other but rather intermingled, yielding a synthesis wherein wealth is inherently connected with leisure and freedom for one's Dharma practice (Yü 2012). Regarding the question of

karma, in esoteric Buddhism, as in most schools of Mahāyāna, the distinction between wholesome and unwholesome activities (karma) is not absolute. Even the distinction between good and bad seems to depend on religious context (Sørensen 2011: 206). The religious context of this case study includes several factors, such as a restrictive policy towards religion on the part of the government, and the more concrete reality of COVID-19.

Figure 2: Group practice, October 2018. (Photo by the author.)

Figure 3: Other commodities sold by the group. (Photo by the author.)

To conclude, the trajectory of Nyigmapa Buddhism in contemporary China is generating creative ways for lay Buddhists to maintain their practice under challenging conditions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The sale of necessary commodities such as face masks by an urban Buddhist group of devotees during the pandemic as a means to uphold their practice exemplifies the living relationship between material objects and merit. This relationship, I argue, is a form of ritual economy. According to Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang ritual economies "are expenditures of wealth on ritual, religious, ethical, and social bonding practices, forms of consumption that do not directly lead to profit accumulation and often eat up profits and savings for nonutilitarian ends" (Yang 2020: 281). A ritual economy involves human transactions but also economic exchanges with the divine world of gods. It diverts a segment of wealth from the material economy. But unlike the profit economy, which stresses accumulation of wealth and the intake of profit, the ethos of the ritual economy is generosity, self-abnegation, and the willingness to give out or part with one's material wealth (Yang 2020: 282). In this framework, this economic network around the group comprises all the actors involved in exchanges related to the activities (both devotional and commercial). The money earned from this act is used to support their religious practice—a practice which is aimed at their liberation and ultimately at the liberation of all beings.[15] Applying an emic approach, I suggest that the relationship

[15] For the Nyingmapa follower, practice (修行 *xiuxing*) is a lifetime process aimed at becoming a Bodhisattva and liberating others (interview, 2019). They maintain that the Bodhicitta (菩萨心 *pusaxin*) is properly understood as the

between the sale of face masks and greed should be understood as dialectic rather than contradictory. From this perspective, face masks can be transformed into Buddhist merit, which serves not only this group of people and their teacher, but their goal to help other people achieve liberation as well.

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enlightened mind that strives towards awakening, but also empathy and compassion for the benefit of all sentient beings.

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