

DHARMA STUFF: TRAPPED BY THE TRAPPINGS

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This may be my last apologia for a while. Hope they are useful in clarifying my mistakes and pointing out that we all make them.

In those thirty years of practicing, as regards the results of sitting meditation, apparently the only thing I accumulated was more dharma toys. In the beginning I had no toys. I had no shrine, no statues, no mala (beads), no nothing. I had a little piece of paper with my dharma name and a line drawing of the Buddha on it. That was my shrine and I placed it on a little shelf at eye level while I practiced meditation..

But while I sat there for thirty years, although I didn't accumulate any real meditation results, I did manage to accumulate an incredible amount of dharma "stuff".

For example, I tried out every kind of cushion to find the one most comfortable for my rear-end. I had cushions piled on cushions. I made ramp-like cushions out of graduated layers of carpet samples that I cut up, cushions stuffed with buckwheat hulls, cushions shaped like kidneys, rectangular cushions that cut off the circulation in my thighs, Zen cushions (zafu) we made ourselves, cushions stuffed with Kapok, and the list goes on. I could write a long article (and have) just about meditation cushions. P.S. I did finally find the right kind of cushion

And I had all kinds of little tables to set my sadhanas on, the texts I was chanting or reading. I had wooden tables especially made and painted for me by Tibetans. I designed tables and had them made. I even had a special mini-spotlight installed on my ceiling with barn-doors that placed a rectangle of light just on the area of text I wanted it on.

I went through any number of ways to burn candles. I had special Chinese lotus lights that I could dim to where I wanted them. I had shawls for my shoulders, all kinds of them, ones from India, and ones I measured and made myself.

I built or had built small and large wooden shrines, one out of old 2-foot-wide (two-inch thick) cherry wood, others made of black walnut. Some were small and portable, others were large and wide. Most were multi-tiered and held dozens of statues and dharma items. I spared no expense.

I then started a whole mail-order import business for dharma items to help out our monastery, because at the time they could not handle shipping things to practitioners. I staffed and ran it for many years and by way of that had a river of dharma stuff flowing through our center from which I could cherry-pick whatever I liked. And I liked.

I had malas, the 108-bead rosaries that the Tibetan Buddhist use to count prayers and chant mantras. I had malas made out of coral, of lapis lazuli, of crystal, of Bodhi-seeds, of lotus seeds, of sandalwood, and other woods, of amber, and all kinds of semi-precious stones. The list goes on.

I had damaru (the small hand drums) and the larger chöd drums. I had Native American drums, Irish drums, and a large Tibetan drum that could only be hung in a frame. I had hand-cymbals,

sets of cymbals, and large brass singing bowls. Of course I had the traditional vajra and bells used in Tibetan ritual practice, and learned how to use them. There were brocades and gaus, and on and on.

I learned to read Tibetan script. As part of our dharma-goods project, I had translated and printed (on fine paper with foil-embossed covers) many of the major practice texts of our lineage.

I could go on. And I have not even described the dozens of fine statues of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other Tibetan deities I acquired, and so on. I had lockets and vials, packets of blessing pills, etc. door mantras, door hangings, wall hangings, etc. Enough already.

And you know the punch line here. I was all dressed up dharma-style, but with nowhere to go, as in: I was not really learning what I needed to learn.

To be perfectly honest, aside from my inability to really learn to meditate, I did an awful lot of other practices, many of which were good for me, and did help to remove obscurations in my mind, so don't be put off by my sense of humor here with all the paraphernalia. I am laughing at myself.

I guess I needed all that dharma stuff to keep my hopes up of getting anywhere with my practice. It did help, all that stuff, but was no substitute for progress with authentic meditation. All the elaborate Tibetan dharma items were just the frosting on the cake. I had the frosting, but no cake.

In other words, endlessly adding on to dharma stuff did not guarantee learning dharma meditation. It was just more stuff, but nice stuff.

And while I still love and admire all that stuff, let's not confuse the baby with the bathwater. In America (at least for me) the dharma came wrapped in Tibetan culture and no one was interested (or easily able) to separate the one from the other, lest something be lost in translation. I understand that.

All of my dharma practice was done in Tibetan, because it was unclear what might be lost if we suddenly switched to English, and we didn't have any enlightened Americans (yet) to help us rewrite all of those practices in English. Such separation of what is Tibetan from what is universal dharma can only be done over time as we as a culture become enlightened enough to distinguish one from the other.

They tell me that it takes Buddhism about 300 years to enter a new country. Since we are not really even 100 years in yet, things are still a little murky in the baby and the bathwater department.

When your teachers (and the liberating teachings they bring) are wrapped in Tibetan culture, some rubs off. We end up respecting the culture (perhaps overmuch) in which the precious dharma appears to us.

The dharma has to do one of two things. It will either die out in this country or grow and spread. Since it is essentially the truth of the mind, it is not about to die off or go away just now, so it seems it will grow and spread, there being nothing more lasting or true than it is. It will outlast all of these meditation fads and what-not.

Being caught up in the flow of dharma entering this country has been amazing, an eye-opening experience. Unlike most religions, which are dead-set on converting everything to their faith, Buddhism is not like that. And this is a remarkable aspect of Buddhism.

Buddhism is so fair or “good” that it changes nothing of whatever original religion it finds when it becomes available in a new country. This is totally clear from looking at Tibet. The original Bön religion of Tibet was not stamped out and removed. It remains today, like insects in amber, preserved in the Buddhism that flowed into Tibet. How is this possible?

It is possible because Buddhism actually fulfills other religions that it contacts. It answers the questions, often unspoken, that exist in these religions. Buddhism can exist side-by-side with other faiths, because it complements and fulfills needs, and does not oppose anything. It is there to help, and it does. So it will flow into this country and society, existing side-by-side with whatever religion or spiritual practice we now have.

Buddhism is really all about knowing the true nature of the mind. It has no cosmogenesis, no original sin, actually no beginning (and foresees no end). It doesn't even have a god. It is all about using our innate intelligence to free ourselves from obscurations and become aware. Not a bad thing.

As for all of my dharma stuff, I am going to turn what little knowledge of it I have to use and perhaps write some blogs here about how to use it properly. I am working on a video that shows how to use the Tibetan rosary (called a ‘mala’) for saying mantras. Does that interest anyone here?