



Historical Soft Power: The Role of Indian Buddhist Monks in Peaceful Spread of Buddhism in Tibet

¹Shivam Bahuguna

¹Assistant Professor

¹Hamdard Institute of International Studies,

¹Jamia Hamdard University, New Delhi, India

Abstract : Buddhism spread across the world mostly through voluntary acceptance and organic processes instead of state-backed violence. In the spread of Buddhism, the other religious systems that it encountered, such as Hinduism, Confucianism, Daoism, Jainism, Shintoism, Tengri, and Bon, were not wiped out but organically incorporated. This demonstrates a typical historical example of Indian Soft Power. But the concept of Soft Power does not explain the complex process of incorporation. The question remains as to what ideas and practices enabled this spread without requiring organized state-backed violence. This paper examines the case of Tibet and argues that persuasion through debate was a key aspect in Tibet adopted Buddhism. Indian Buddhist monks, adept in the Abhidharma training, were able to thus deploy sophisticated reasoning in turning favour of both elites and commoners in Tibet, showcasing the active processes involved in generating Indian soft power.

IndexTerms – Buddhism, Tibet, India, Soft Power

I. INTRODUCTION

I-A: THE ABSENCE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Buddhism is one of the most important cultural entities to have emerged in the ancient era, operating as a religion, philosophy, tradition, and even means of knowledge generation. While Buddhism originally emerged from India, Buddhism ended up becoming a bridge for the cultures outside to bring Indic culture into a continuum of philosophical conversation with various other schools of thought throughout Asia, such as Shintoism, Confucianism, Taoism, Tengrism, etc. Long before the modern-day phenomenon of globalisation, the message, and teachings of Buddha on seeking peace and harmony went on to become significant all over Asia through monks and lay practitioners, side by side on trade and pilgrimage routes. Not a single soldier was dispatched with the purpose of spreading Buddhism. Yet, several nations went on to become Buddhist majority with deep cultural ties to India - Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Mongolia. Apart from these, Buddhism also continues to flourish among sizable populations in many other nations such as China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia, Nepal, etc. (World Population Review, 2023).

Buddhism has a vast history of syncretic spread across Asia. In this paper, we attempt to answer two important questions in special reference to the historical instance of Indian Soft Power in the form of Indian monks spreading Buddhism:

- If not proselytization, what was the mechanism through which Buddhism spread and established itself in other regions?
- How did Buddhism establish themselves in faraway lands without disrupting or displacing the local traditions? In other words, how did Buddhism coexist with the local traditions?

In International Relations, the idea of Soft Power was first articulated by Joseph Nye. According to Nye, soft power is the power of persuasion through which a nation is able to shape the preferences and perceptions of others. Soft power can work through the attraction of both tangible aspects such as economy and technology, as well as intangibles such as culture, language, music, cinema, religion, etc. (Nye, 2004). However, the issue with the concept of Soft Power is that it only explains the outer results. There are no means to examine how soft power percolates. Thus, in this paper, we shall attempt to analyse this process in the case of Tibet. Insofar as Tibet is concerned, Tibetan society's embrace of the Buddhist Dharma was a slow and gradual process, ultimately establishing itself through gaining popularity with the masses where Indian gurus played a significant role, making it an empirically rich case to study historical Indian soft power in action.

I-B: DEBATE AS ABHIDHARMA VERSUS PROSELYTIZATION

Ever since its emergence and catapulting to larger geographical relevance, Buddhism has had a subtle relationship with the state. The story of Emperor Ashoka's taking up of the Buddhist Dharma is well known. After his brutal victory against Kalinga left him shocked, he took up Buddhism and renounced conquest by force and instead opted for 'conquest by Dharma' instead. He made it his duty to spread the message of Buddha not only to his subjects, but also to the realms around his empire, and contributed to making Buddhism international. He extended the influence of Buddhism from northern Bengal on the eastern side, to Nepal and Kashmir in the north, Gandhara, and Kamboja in the north-west and, as well as sending missions to Sri Lanka, Burma, Egypt, Syria. In his reign, assemblies of monks became common and he even gave patronage to the Third Buddhist Council (Hazra, 1981, p.37). In the canon, this relationship is elaborated through terms such as *mahasammata*, *cakkavatti*, and *dhammaraja*, mentioned in texts such as the Cakkavatti Sutta. Under Ashoka the dual structure of the state and the Sangha was established (Sharma, 1986, pp.62-63). From the very beginning, the Buddha asked the Bhikkhus of his Sangha to travel and spread the Dharma. However, as articulated by the Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda Maha Thera, the crucial difference was that instead of preaching of ill-will and without any violence. In his words:

"Buddhism had no quarrel with the national traditions and customs, art and culture of the people who accepted it as a way of life but allowed them to exist with refinement. The Buddha's message of love and compassion opened the hearts of men and they willingly accepted the Teachings, thereby helping Buddhism to become a world religion. Buddhist missionaries were invited by the independent countries which welcomed them with due respect. Buddhism was never introduced to any country through the influence of colonial or any other political power" (Maha Thera, 2011).

It must be kept in mind that 'proselytization' and its related terms all have negative connotations, and is now inexplicably linked to Western ethnocentrism, cultural imperialism as well as colonialism. Thus, any undertaking to preach one's religion or tradition must thus be understood as 'dialogue' instead (Berger, 2010). Michael Walter, for instance, uses the term 'transmission' to much more accurately encapsulate the spread of Buddhist Dharma (Walter, 2009, p. 111). The proselytization model does not apply to Buddhism. For Buddhists, propagating the word of the Buddha is considered a noble task. The core argument is that Tibet became Buddhist through debate and dialogue by a plethora of Indian Buddhist gurus over the course of centuries. This was not a one-way process. Rather, the gurus took active part in spiritual discourse, undertaking debates, lectures, and lessons. It was only through a far more open form of debate and persuasion that Indian Buddhist monks were able to convince Tibetans to take up Buddhism for their own. This form of preaching and persuasion must be understood differently than the popularly understood idea of proselytization, where the primary idea is to convince that the recipient's original faith is wrong, shameful and thus, must be discarded or face the wrath of God.

The debating tradition of Buddhism cannot be understood fully without a brief discussion of the *Abhidharma* tradition. It can be broadly understood as a scholastic enterprise that developed after the death of Lord Buddha, involving re-examination, developing new methods of organization that would essentially clarify the core meanings of received teachings. In the literal sense, there are two possible meanings of *Abhidharma*. The first is by considering *abhi* as the prefix that denotes "with regard to" which implies the discipline whose subject matter is the *Dharma*. The other denotes a distinction and a preponderance, which implies the essence of Buddha's teachings, or that which goes beyond what is given in the discourses. It also represents the institutionalization of Buddhist thought from purely oral to written. Monastic debates concerning doctrine within Buddhism, as well as debates between Buddhists vis a vis Jains, and Brahmanical schools also started to become commonplace (Ronkin, 2022). In *Abhidharma*, the learned monks of the Sangha would essentially involve the abstraction and reconstitution of the various *sutras* in accordance with varying analytical criteria. Such an examination enabled to distinguish the factors that had defiled or corrupted the practice of Dharma that could risk the follower being ensnared in the process of rebirth. The emergence of *Abhidharma* led to the refinement of the practice of scholastic debates, to the extent that in the later stages of the development of the *Abhidharma* traditions, the texts became complex philosophical treatises, often deploying sophisticated methods of argumentation and interpretation. In some cases, these texts became often as important as the original sutra itself, reaching an authoritative status almost approximating the legitimacy of the Buddha's original teachings (Cox, 2004, p. 4). The *Abhidharma* tradition can be seen as a historical means through which Indian Soft Power through the vehicle of Buddhism.

II. THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM IN TIBET**II-A: BUDDHISM'S FIRST ARRIVAL IN TIBET**

According to historical sources, Buddhism first arrived in Tibet through elite channels, that of royal marriage of the Tibetan emperor Songsten Gampo (618-650 CE). Under Songsten Gampo, Tibet went on to become a major power in Central Asia, expanding its borders and establishing the new capital at Lhasa. During the process of sealing political ties, he married Princess Bhrikuti from Nepal and Princess Wencheng from Tang dynasty China, both of whom happened to be Buddhist. Their main role was in the establishment of the Jokhang Temple, the very heart of Tibetan Buddhism. Apart from this, Emperor Songsten Gampo also attempted to bring high culture to Tibet by developing a literary script, and which was developed in close consultation with Sanskrit scholars (Powers, 2007, pp.144-147). However, an important aspect to be noted was that till the reign of Songsten Gampo, Buddhism was still mostly restricted to the royal court. At that time, many Tibetans still thought of it as an alien tradition from outside, as most of the Buddhist priests during this time was either Indian or Chinese (Snellgrove & Richardson, 2003, p.77). Furthermore, Songsten Gampo did not completely do away with indigenous Bon traditions. While he was keen to propagate Buddhism, he did not completely do away with Bon religion, for that was a major source of legitimation as these beliefs also traced the kings to divine origin (Kollmar-Paulenz, 2007, p. 312).

This set the stage for the Indian gurus about a century later. By creating a centralised empire that could stand up to its neighbours, envisioning Buddhism as a unifying Dharma and developing a common Indic script to read, Songsten Gampo laid the roots for a unified state that was arguably much like the Mauryan empire under Ashoka. So, when the second Dharma King, Trisong Detsen, took the throne of Tibet, he was already deeply influenced by Buddhism and saw it as something that could unify the people of Tibet. Under him, the first tradition of preaching through debates began to flower, creating a system of monastic linkages between India and Tibet, which paved the way for erudite Indian Buddhist monks to bring Buddhist Dharma to the people of Tibet.

II-B: DEBATES IN THE TIBETAN EMPIRE ERA

Emperor Trisong Detsen took the throne sometime around 756 CE. Under him Tibet regained power and territories that had been lost by some of the predecessors. Tibet regained access to the Silk Route and its lucrative trade, and forced the Tang dynasty to put Tibet and China on equal footing. As Tibet expanded under his rule, Trisong Detsen was increasingly impressed and influenced by Buddhists that he encountered from China, Nepal, and India.

One of the more important moments in the move towards popular propagation of Buddhism was when Trisong Detsen invited the Indian Guru Shantarakshita, though no one was able to understand his language. It was only after the Tibetan court found Ananta, a Brahmin who had been exiled to Tibet, who translated the Guru, that Emperor Trisong Detsen was able to learn about Buddhism. According to historical sources, Shantarakshita was cross examined about his teachings and he answered all the questions posed to him with fine capability, and thus, gained royal favour. Shantarakshita also called over Padmasambhava, and under their influence, the emperor subsequently decided to build a grand monastic institution and thus, established the massive Samye monastery (van Schaik, 2011, pp. 34-35). The monastery became an important centre for studying and preaching of Buddhism. It was modelled after the great monastery at Odantapuri in Bihar (van Schaik, 2011, p. 36).

Samye monastery was not just limited to learning and monastic training. It also became the site for important debates. Eighth century Tibet was marked by a sudden influx of Buddhist monks from both India and China. Multiple sects and schools of thought competed for both followership and patronage. In general, however, a growing interest in matters of Buddhist doctrine began to develop as there were different competing interpretations. This process ultimately culminated in the Great Debate at Samye, another powerful narrative of Tibetan Buddhism. Over time, as Buddhism began to become popular among Tibetans, there was also the development of factionalism between the followers of Indian Mahayana path and the Chinese Chan school on the best way to attain enlightenment. The Indian Mahayanist argued for the gradualist path, while the Chan school believed that it was attained instantaneously. Thus, Emperor Trisong decided to give both a fair chance by holding a series of debates on the nature of Buddhahood and awakening (Powers, 2007, p.149). The emperor brought forth the Indian scholar Kamalashila and the Chinese scholar Hoshang, also known as Moheyan, to argue each sides. Most historical sources agree that Kamalashila was the unambiguous winner of the great debate. This meant that Indian scriptures were preferred for the purpose of translation (van Schaik, 2011, p.39). While scholars are still unsure whether if it was one grand debate or a series of exchanges, the story of the grand debate is strongly imprinted in the popular Tibetan consciousness (Walter, 2009, p.52).

The establishment of consensus through debate and discussion has always been a feature of Buddhism. Ever since its emergence after Siddhartha Gautama attained Nirvana and became the Buddha, he would insist and advise the Sangha to hold regular consultations on the lines of the Vajjian republic to maintain unity (Dissanayake, 2009, p.29). After his death, due to differing opinions and interpretations of his teachings, the Sangha would hold Buddhist councils, wherein they would discuss and debate to arrive on a consensus. The very first Buddhist council, in fact, shortly after the Parinirvana of the Buddha at Rajgaha (Hazra, 1981, p.26). Thus, what Emperor Trisong Detsen did in Samye was but follow the traditions of many other notable kings who either followed or gave patronage to Buddhism, such as the Kushana King Kanishka.

The third most important monarch was Ralpachan. His enthusiasm for building monasteries and translating and copying Buddhist literature was immense. Like Ashoka, Ralpachan too sent out edicts that preached Buddhist ethics. He ordered production of a large number of books. Classics such as the Perfection of Wisdom sutras were made, and the monasteries received great support from the state (van Schaik, 2011, p.44). These three rulers are collectively known as the Three Dharma Kings of the Tibetan Empire, who, at different times, promoted Buddhism among their subjects with enthusiasm. The Three Dharma Kings is a powerful narrative within Tibetan Buddhism. This is also a narrative that is supported by Tibet's government in exile. Quoted verbatim from the official CTA site:

“The official Tibetan Royal Year of the modern Tibetan calendar is dated from the enthronement of King Nyatri Tsenpo in 127 BCE. This lineage of Tibetan monarchy constituted for well over a thousand years, till King Tri Wudum Tsen, more commonly known as Lang Dharma, was assassinated in 842. Most illustrious of the above kings were Songtsen Gampo, Trisong Detsen and Ngadhak Tri Ralpachen. They are called the Three Great Kings” (Central Tibetan Administration, 1985).

A cursory and reductionist reading of the Dharma Kings might make it appear that Tibet's turn to Buddhism was purely a state-led effort. However, historical examples are abound that prove that while the Three Dharma Kings' enthusiasm did play a role in the spread of Buddhism, the actual process of mass spread did not happen until much later. For instance, Ralpachan's enthusiasm and strict policies in favour of Buddhism backfired. The excess resources going to Buddhist monks often created resentments, and many people became hostile to Buddhist preachers because of that. Ultimately, Ralpachan was assassinated by his brother, Lang Dharma, who was backed by anti-Buddhist factions within the royal court (van Schaik, 2011, pp.45-46).

The Dharma King's role can be better understood as setting enthusiasm and popular discourse around Buddhism by simply following it while being kings. However, the actual process of rooting happened when the state fostered an environment wherein dissemination occurred through debates and discourses that gained popular legitimacy. It was only after certain Indian Buddhist monks had established the Dharma through these debates that Buddhism went on to organically become the religion of the Tibetan people as well as the Tibetan state. To this day, Dharma debates form an important part of Tibetan Buddhism. They are now an important segment of the final examination that Tibetan monks must undertake to graduate and become fully ordained (His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama, 1990, p. 128). Even though Tibet has faced political hardships and turmoil, Tibetan Buddhism continues to persist in the land where it came of age while at the same time, the Tibetan exile diaspora also plays an active role in spreading its practices to the world through its various resources in India and abroad.

Whether it was Shantarakshita, Padmasambhava or Kamalashila, almost all the important historical sources place their importance in the acts of convincing the listening party in the importance of Buddhism, and that it did not necessarily violate their traditional beliefs, only complemented them with an ethical system. Tibetan beliefs and practices, whose aggregation is now collectively referred to as Bon, comprises of beliefs in many local protector deities and spirits, based on their location. With the arrival of Buddhism, this worship did not die out. What the Buddhists provided was a framework of moral guidance – through karma, or one's deeds, is decided whether a person reaps a cycle of perpetual suffering or breaks free. Buddhism became a connecting thread between the different deities and spirits. This syncretic process is portrayed within Tibetan Buddhist history as the act of “demon-taming” wherein these gods, spirits and demons were brought under the larger framework of a developing Tibetan Buddhism. These stories trace themselves especially to Shantarakshita and Padmasambhava (Shakabpa, pp. 132-133). This way,

Buddhism in Tibet continued to spread without waging a holy war against Bon religion. Since Buddhism was followed by many of Tibet's neighbours, that convinced the ruling classes of the 'international' nature of Buddhism, while its universal teachings also appealing to the ordinary masses. Thus, Buddhist Dharma gradually ended up becoming widely followed among both the rulers as well as the masses (van Schaik, 2011, p.32).

While it is true that Bon priests faced persecution as well, but given the Tibetan spiritual landscape of multiple competing sects and ideas, it was not an instance of one monolithic Buddhist community persecuting Bon. Rather, they were part of the process. Bon too absorbed some ideas and practices of Buddhists. By fifteenth century, the discourse shifted to the similarities between Buddhism and Bon, and many scholars are still not in consensus about which influenced which. Bon also borrowed monastery-building and monastic discipline from Buddhists, and many other Bon priests also took up practices similar to that of the wandering *yogins* (Bretfeld, 2007, p. 370). All this shows that despite the recurring friction, Bon and Buddhism did not have a relationship of irreconcilable civilizational clash. Rather, it was marked by both mutual learning as well as confrontation.

II-C: ATISHA'S DEBATES AND REVIVAL IN FRAGMENTED TIBET

The next great monk who carried on with the tradition of propagating Buddhist Dharma through debate and dialogue was Atisha. By the end of the 8th century, Tibet had fragmented into different fiefdoms. Many of them were also against Buddhism. For around two centuries, due to political chaos and fragmentation, Tibet's culture as a whole received a setback, and with it, so did Tibetan Buddhism, despite its steady growth and its increasing acceptance among the population.

In the late tenth century, one younger prince from western Tibet found himself with gold that was of no use for him anymore due to the death of his brother, whose ransom he had been trying to pay. Since the brother had then taken vows, he instead decided to use that gold to instead invite a Buddhist master from India. The Tibetan party travelled to Vikramshila monastery and chose Dipamkarashrijana, also known by the name Atisha, who was well known for his multiple qualities, including a firm grasp on philosophy and tantric practices (van Schaik, 2011, p.57). He was most known for his influential text, *Lamp for the Path of Enlightenment*, thus also playing the founding role for the emergence of the Sakya, Kagyu and Gelug traditions of Tibetan Buddhism (Shambhala Publications, 2022). Most narratives around Atisha hail him for purifying and reintroducing purer form of Buddhism after the anti-Buddhist purges of the last king of the Tibetan empire, Lang Derma (International Kadampa Buddhist Union, 2023). He is described in many historical sources as a great debater, who successfully defended and re-established Buddhist dharma wherever he went. This is how he is described:

"He then dedicated five more years to teaching in various other places in Central and Southern Tibet, guiding disciples of good fortune to a correct experience of the inner meaning of the Sutras and Tantras. Wherever the Doctrine had disappeared he reestablished it; where it had diminished he revived it; and, where it had become stained by wrong interpretations he purified it. Thus, he brought Dharma in Tibet into a state free from distortion." (Tulku and Mullin, 1983, pp. 10-11).

Though originally planned for three years, he ended up staying thirteen years in Tibet. At the time of his death, he was not the only Indian scholar. He had multiple contemporaries doing the same in Tibet, re-establishing Buddhist dharma through the medium of debates and lectures. Like Padmasambhava, who was given the honorific term Guru Rinpoche, Atisha was given the title of Jowoje, which means 'Noble Lord' in Tibetan (van Schaik, 2011, p.60). Atisha remains highly significant in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, and he is regarded as the most important figure in the later spread period. Scholars remark on Atisha's effectiveness due to his systematic approach, strong theoretical foundation, clear-cut set of teachings and most importantly, a high personal charisma that was said to be the trademark of Indian Buddhist masters. His doctrine essentially combined conventional Mahayana thinking, some Tantric Vajrayana practices, coming up with a characteristic synthesis of monastic and Tantric lifestyle (Bretfeld, 2007, p.357).

After Atisha, the process of full indigenization was complete. Tibetan Buddhism firmly developed its indigenous orders and continued the practice that was started by their Indian predecessors. Atisha's disciples created This is best demonstrated in 1240 Mongol invasion of Tibet under the chieftain Koden. After the invasion, Koden summoned Sakya Pandita for official surrender but was instead so impressed by him that he instead became a follower of Buddhism. He instead offered Sakya Pandita a special relationship wherein the Mongols would protect Tibet from outside threats and the Lamas would become the spiritual preceptors for the Mongol khans (Powers, 2007, p.159). Of the traditions that emerged under the tutelage of Atisha, his role is especially prominent for Gelug tradition, the predominant form of Buddhism practiced by Tibetans to this very day. Through his disciple Dromtonpa, the teachings of Atisha were passed down multiple generations, including Je Tsongkhapa (Atisha Centre, 2009). Je Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelugpa sect, was termed by historian Edward Conze as the "last great thinker of the Buddhist world" for his tireless efforts in consolidating and uniting Tibet (Conze, 1993, p. 114). The Lama who was subsequently recognised posthumously as the first Dalai Lama was a disciple of Je Tsongkhapa (Powers, 2007, p. 474). Atisha's reforms, thus, provided a rallying point for Tibetan identity to emerge years later, even as Tibet was surrounded by stronger powers.

III. VAJRAYANA: THE SYNTHESIS OF INDIAN AND TIBETAN

Before we chart how Tibetan Buddhism absorbed Vajrayana influences, we look at the brief history of Vajrayana Buddhism in India itself. After the fall of the Guptas and the Vakatakas in northern India, central empires fragmented into smaller feudal kingdoms. There was a fall in trade and royal sponsorships towards Buddhism, and thus, Buddhists began borrowing from rival groups such as Pashupatas and Kapalikas. Eventually, some of these Buddhists began to incorporate rituals, visualizations, and symbols of Tantra into practices of Buddhism (Powers, 2007, p.254). Despite the collapse of the Tibetan empire in the early 10th century, Tibetan pilgrims continued to arrive in India, and in the process, they also absorbed these influences. The chief among them were a set of rituals and narratives compiled in a series of texts known as Yoginitantras. After gradual collaboration with Indian and Nepali scholars, these Tantras were then introduced to Tibet. Within the Indian Tantric traditions exist the concept of holy places known as pitha and the knowledge and concept around the sacred abodes were also incorporated within Tibetan Buddhism (Huber, 2008, pp.84-86). With the Vajrayana also emerged the rich visual art for which Tibet is known, including the mandala art, which is a representation of the universe that is used as an aid for meditation (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). The entire process was simultaneous. The absorbing of Tantric influences by Tibetan Buddhism occurred at the same time as the populace of Tibet receiving their transmission. The process continued to carry on until the last segment of Buddhism was wiped out in India after years of relative decline and the destructive blow of Bakhtiyar Khilji.

This close relationship between Buddhism as being practiced in India influencing the Buddhism in Tibet has been documented. This is why many other scholars have often used the term Indo-Tibetan Buddhism to describe it. For example, the seminal work by David Snellgrove is titled *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (2002). The reason is simple – Tibetan Buddhism was constantly influenced by Indian Buddhism until the very last. From the seventh century onwards, a large section of the Buddhist literature that was originally written in Sanskrit was translated to Tibetan, so much so that to this day, a lot of the knowledge about later years of Indian Buddhism actually comes from Tibetan sources (Snellgrove, 2002, p.45). Yael Bentor, in his work *Consecration of Images and Stupas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism* (1996) also points out to the syncretic mixture of Vajrayana. In his study of the consecration rituals, it was observed that these rituals were rooted in long history, combining Vedic, Indian Buddhist and Tibetan traditions. For example, the ritual of opening the eye is found in almost every Buddhist country alongside India, such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, China, etc. (Bentor, 1996, pp.33-34). All these show that the process of Buddhist transmission in Asia was not a single moment of a passive populace accepting the traditions brought to them from outside uncritically, but had an active involvement of the populace in the process of persuasion and the change of viewpoint. This makes Buddhism the only of the world religions that has aims at universality and proliferated by a gradual and voluntary process.

IV. CONCLUSION

The process through which Buddhism spread to Tibet shows how Indic traditions have the characteristic of embedding themselves within the local religious and cultural milieu solely through the power of its message, where the role of articulation through debate and persuasion played a key role. This persuasion also won out the support of the elites who sought to further enrich Tibet's fledgling Buddhist tradition with texts and literature from India, as well as seeking learned scholars from India's long standing Buddhist schools such as Nalanda and Vikramshila. Tibet's beliefs in their deities, spirits and demons were then gradually incorporated especially within the Tantric element of Vajrayana. With time, this form of Buddhism gradually entered the popular consciousness of majority Tibetans, who then later took up the work of transmission themselves. All this ultimately evolved giving birth to Tibetan Buddhism as we know of today. This is why many scholars prefer to use the term Indo-Tibetan Buddhism as well. In terms of its traditions, it is known as Vajrayana Buddhism. The symbol of Vajra, which is also important in Hinduism, is also a prominent motif that recurs in Vajrayana Buddhism.

This entire historical process is a demonstration of Indian Soft Power in action in the historical context. Tibetans have always seen India as a holy land for being the birthplace of Buddhism, and as far as Tibetans are concerned, the teachings of Buddha are universal. There is no crisis of religious identity. Whether one chooses to call it Tibetan Buddhism, Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism – there is no need to worry about its identity. As far as the Tibetans are concerned, India is their holy land, the place where Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha.

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