

Tricycle Talks

“A Journey through Buddhist History”

Episode #121 with Donald S. Lopez Jr.

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Donald S. Lopez Jr.: I really wanted to show how even though Buddhism disappeared from India, at some point, whatever disappearance means, despite the fact that we know so little about the history of Buddhism in India, the dharma that we have from India is found all over the world, right? And I'm trying to show how that dharma appears in unusual times and places, in historically important times and places, and the way that that's occurred over the past 2,500 years.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Donald Lopez. Don is the Arthur E. Lind distinguished university professor of Buddhist and Tibetan studies at the University of Michigan, and a longtime *Tricycle* contributing editor. In his new book, *Buddhism: A Journey Through History*, he lays out a comprehensive introduction to the history of Buddhism, tracing its development across continents and centuries. In my conversation with Don, we talk about the challenges in attempting to tell any single history of Buddhism, how translation has contributed to Buddhism's survival as a tradition, the debate surrounding Buddhism's decline in India, and the story of Buddha's nemesis and would-be assassin. So here's my conversation with Don Lopez.

James Shaheen: OK, so I'm here with scholar and longtime *Tricycle* contributor Don Lopez. Hi Don, it's great to be with you.

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: Hey James, nice to see you.

James Shaheen: So Don, we're here to talk about your new book, and the book has an ambitious title: *Buddhism: A Journey Through History*. So can you tell us a bit about the book and how you came to write it?



Donald S. Lopez Jr.: Yes, so several years ago, Yale University Press contacted me, and they asked me if I would write what they called a global history of Buddhism. When I heard that term, I thought about an encyclopedia, perhaps a volume on each of the Buddhist cultures of Asia, a volume on Buddhism in Europe, a volume on Buddhism in America. I couldn't imagine doing something like this in a single volume. So I asked how long they wanted it to be, and they said 210,000 words. A typical academic book these days is about 80,000 words, so it was almost three volumes in normal printing. I've done a lot of long books over the course of my career, but those have been translations and anthologies and dictionaries. I've never done something that I wrote myself of that length. So I thought I would try to accept that challenge.

So that's how it began, but then of course the challenge was how do you organize a book of that length that is supposed to be a global history of Buddhism. So I thought about this for a long time before I wrote anything. And then the more and more I thought about how to approach the project, I thought about the importance of stories in Buddhism. We tend to think of Buddhism being about meditation or being about doctrine. But when we look at the history of Buddhism, Buddhism is mostly spread by stories. Most lay Buddhists around the world over the centuries have known the Jataka stories, the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha, and of course the monastic code is also stories. We don't think about that. So we have 547 such Jataka stories just in the Pali collection. We think about the vows of monks and nuns in all of the surviving vinayas, monastic systems. We have over five hundred vows for monks and nuns together. And we often think of the Buddha as saying, “OK, here are the vows.” But that's not how it worked. It was an organic process in which something happened. Somebody went and told the Buddha, “So-and-so did this,” and the Buddha said, “OK, from now on, you can't do that anymore.”

James Shaheen: You know, some of them are pretty outrageous, some of the things—

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: They're very outrageous. And of course the first one resulted in a vow of celibacy. So that means that there's a story about each of those 500+ violations. And so I thought, well, maybe I can tell some stories. And so how many should there be? And I thought, well, the



Buddha had thirty-two major marks on his body. They were very famous. So what about thirty-two stories? And maybe each of those should be about five thousand words. This really comes from my experience teaching, where we usually have an hour class at a college or university, and you have to give ten minutes to the students to get out and go on to the next class, so you speak for about fifty minutes, and that's one hundred words a minute, typically. When we have somebody come to campus to give a lecture, for a job, we tell them to speak for fifty minutes, so fifty minutes is sort of the golden time. So I thought, let me write thirty-two. That turned out to be too many; the press wanted me to cut a couple. So it went down to thirty 5,000-word essays, each of which is a story, and those stories are also historically accurate. And I took a lot of comfort in the fact that the French word *histoire* means both story and history.

So I ended up writing thirty self-contained stories about Buddhism. Each has a single abstract noun title, but I knew that readers would need some sort of introduction, so I wrote about an eighty-page overview of the life of the Buddha, the basic teachings, and a sort of a run through the various histories of the countries of Asia and also the West. So this is a self-contained little book that could almost be read on its own. And then after that, I sort of dive into these thirty stories. So that's the long answer to your question.

James Shaheen: You know, you say something interesting here. You say that to tell the history of Buddhism would be to tell the history of the universe, the history of a past with no beginning moving forward toward a future that has no end. So how do you begin to tell such a tale? You just said how you solve the problem by writing thirty essays, but what is the big challenge here?

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: The big challenge is that there's just so much. Buddhism, of course, has a very long history of 2,500 years. It has so much interaction between the various cultures. So we have Buddhism spreading first to Sri Lanka, and then it goes all around the world. But it's not a single narrative that you can just sort of trace it on a map or on a timeline because monks and nuns keep traveling back to India to receive teachings. They're traveling back and forth; they're going on pilgrimages. There's huge interaction among the various Buddhist cultures. It's really a



network more than a timeline, and so it's impossible to sort of portray a network in a narrative form. And so having these individual stories, which would then give an overview of that network, was really what I was trying to do.

James Shaheen: You point that in writing a history of Buddhism, one challenge is that Sanskrit lacks a term for history, at least in the way that we understand it, in terms of the historical method and so forth. So what does history mean, then, in a Buddhist context?

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: I think we have to go with what we understand it to mean typically in English. When we have the word history in Tibetan, the word that's translated as history is *chos 'byung*, and *chos 'byung* literally means the appearance of the dharma or the arising of the dharma. How did the dharma come to this land? That's what Buddhists are most interested in when they tell their history. They want to show a deep connection back to India. They want to talk about how the dharma arrived in their country. They want to talk about how the first monastery was established, how the first young men were ordained as Buddhist monks. That's the history they want to tell. And so it's really in many ways a monastic history and a history of the connection of the monastic order to the state, to the king, to the throne. So at any rate, to do that in the case of everybody's country would be difficult to do and probably difficult for a general audience. So I put a lot of those stories in there, but that's not the structure of the book.

James Shaheen: Right, so the “story” part of history is really emphasized then. OK, you say that when one seeks to write about Buddhism, one is faced with absence. So I'm going to quote you here. You write, “the historian sees the absent founder, the chronicler sees the absent date, the philosopher sees the absent self, the art historian sees the absent Buddha beneath the Bodhi tree.” So how do you begin to write about these absences?

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: Well, of course, the absent founder is the question of when did the Buddha live? We don't know that. There's huge debates about that and a wide range of opinion across the centuries, something that scholars still write about and worry about. When did the Buddha live?



What did he teach? Those are things that are very difficult to determine. And so when we're talking about a religion that has a founder, not to know his dates and not to know exactly what he taught is an incredible challenge. So that's the biggest challenge, I think, in terms of both the date and the founder.

James Shaheen: So where do you usually land? What dates are you comfortable with, or is it just an open-ended question?

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: I kind of go back and forth. I mean, I think that, as I say in the book, scholars of the New Testament are able to sort of get the dates of Jesus down to maybe just a couple years. We have differences of opinion over centuries in the Buddhist case. So I tend to come down to about 400 BCE plus or minus 50. And so that shows what the challenge is that we have to put like a hundred year sort of brackets around this date.

James Shaheen: So as you've mentioned, any history of Buddhism must include a history of the Buddha. Yet this in itself poses a variety of challenges. Can you briefly tell us about what is and isn't known about the history of the Buddha? You just pointed out that we don't really have a good timeline. How does this impact any history one might attempt to tell about the tradition?

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: Well, the question of the historicity of the Buddha is something that I actually talk about in my next book, which is going to be a life of the Buddha, a second book that I'm doing for Yale. So that one is something I just finished, so it's very much on my mind.

So we'll save historicity of the Buddha for the next podcast, but I'll just say briefly that I think in this case we simply state the problem. That is, we don't know when he lived, and because nothing that he taught was written down for several centuries after his death, if we knew when he died, it's very difficult to determine what he taught. And so I think for, in the case of the book, I just decided, let me follow what Buddhists believe, and of course Buddhists believe different things, but the Theravada tradition believes that the Pali canon is the word of the Buddha. The



Mahayana tradition believes that the Mahayana sutras are the word of the Buddha. In the case of the Pali tradition, we have some questions about that. In the case of the Mahayana tradition, we know that the Buddha didn't teach any of the Mahayana Sutras. They appeared long after his passing. But let's assume that as we talk about the beliefs and practices of those Buddhist cultures.

James Shaheen: So one aspect of the Buddha's life that listeners may not be so familiar with is his relationship with Devadatta. It's one particular story that I found compelling. Devadatta is pitted against him as a nemesis across many lifetimes. So first of all, just tell us who Devadatta is.

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: Devadatta is the Buddha's cousin. There are stories about them being rivals during their childhood in the palace and having wrestling matches and archery contests and things like that. The Buddha goes off and becomes enlightened, comes back to the capital city one year after his enlightenment, and ordains many young men of his own clan, the Shakya clan. Ananda is one, Devadatta is another. So Devadatta is ordained and is reported to be a good monk, a good meditator, and a great teacher of the dharma. And when the Buddha was 72, Devadatta volunteered to take over: “You've gotten old, you've done a wonderful job as the Buddha. It's time for you to retire and rest and relax, and I'll be happy to sort of take over the administrative duties of running the sangha,” and the Buddha responded in a very negative way.

Devadatta was incensed by this and he then went on, according to the story, to try to assassinate the Buddha three different times. Those were unsuccessful, and interestingly, because there were no rules against trying to assassinate the Buddha, he was not kicked out of the sangha. And so when he returned, he went to the Buddha and said, “I would like to recommend that you add five new rules to the monastic code.”

One is that monks no longer eat meat. So we often think of Buddhist monks as vegetarian, but they were not. The word for monk is *bhikshu*, beggar, and you ate what was placed in your bowl.



You never said, “I’ll have the vegan option”; you just ate what was put there. And so the Buddha ate meat. Monks in Sri Lanka continued to eat meat. But at any rate, Devadatta said, how about we make everybody vegetarian. Number two, no longer allowed to go and have meals in the homes of laity. So if you’re a beggar, you’re having this pretty bad food every day, but the laity would invite the Buddha and his monks to their homes for these lavish feasts. This became so important and popular that the monks had to put together a lottery system to see who got to go. So Devadatta said, “Let’s not do that anymore.” He also said, “Let’s not wear new clothes, new robes. Let’s wear rag robes, just the clothes that we find in charnel grounds. We’ll clean these, cut them up, sew them back together. These should be our robes, not these fancy garments.” He also said we should not live in cities and we should not live under a roof. And the Buddha said, well, those are all fine, but I’m going to make those optional, except for one: during the rain retreat you must stay under a shelter during those three months of the monsoon.

Devadatta was very angry, and he convinced a group of young monks to go with him to follow these new rules. The Buddha sent two monks to sort of bring them back. Devadatta, he saw them coming, and he thought, “Oh, they’re coming to join me. I’m so happy.” So Devadatta gave a talk, and then he took a nap. Then these two monks gave a talk, and they convinced these monks to go back. So Devadatta was just overcome with sorrow and hatred when that happened and started to go back to see the Buddha—whether to assassinate him or to repent is unknown. But he had done things that were so bad, he just sunk into the earth and descended to the worst of the Buddhist hells.

So there are five things that are so bad that they overcome anything good you did in this life, they overcome all the things you did in any past life, and they send you directly to hell: killing your father, killing your mother, killing an arhat, an enlightened person, wounding the Buddha, and causing a schism in the sangha, in the community of monks and nuns. And interestingly, when you read that list, you’re told the worst of these is not killing your parents. The worst of these is causing a schism in the sangha. And that’s what Devadatta did.



So that's the story. It's very well known. But what's interesting here is that we might look at this as Devadatta, when we hear these five recommendations that he made to the Buddha, they sound perfectly normal to us. Of course, vegetarianism sounds good, wearing rag robes, not having these giant feasts. What's wrong with this? So, it's possible that by the time that this story was composed, Buddhism had become a very well-established and wealthy city-based institution, and some monks came forward and said, “Listen, you have lost the teachings of our founder. You have lost our dedication to asceticism and to the life of the forest and forest meditation.” And these city monks were so incensed by the suggestions that they just made up the story of Devadatta and said, “Well, yeah, you people who suggest that, you are the followers of the person who tried to kill the Buddha three times.”

James Shaheen: So, you know, the story is quite vividly written and the details are striking, but this isn't the Buddha's first encounter with Devadatta. He's been dogging him for a lifetime. So what are some of the stories about Devadatta and the Buddha and the tales of the Buddha's past lives?

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: If we accept this particular narrative of where the Devadatta story came from, they then started to either compose Jataka stories in which Devadatta was the villain, or they took old Jataka stories and just added Devadatta as the villain. So any time the bodhisattva is murdered, they say, “Oh, the murderer was Devadatta.”

James Shaheen: He's the fall guy.

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: yeah, this person who lopped the limbs off of this great meditator, that was Devadatta. He was the drunken king. So he just becomes the Buddha's nemesis in all of these stories. And then that particular animosity then is supposed to continue on to the lifetime in which he tries to assassinate the Buddha. So it's just a kind of a back projection of this particular



figure who is probably mythological, who's sort of invented to provide a reason not to go back to the ascetic lifestyle, and that he then appears in all these stories later on.

James Shaheen: So the Buddhist order managed to survive despite all Devadatta's attempts to sabotage it, and Buddhism has continued to survive as a tradition, even as many other religious traditions have died out. So, in the book, you raise the question of how this was possible. As you put it, and I'm quoting you here, “What was the appeal of a religion whose most famous dictum is ‘All is suffering’?”

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: That's a big question. So we know, both from Buddhist sources and other sources, there were many ascetic groups in India at the time of the Buddha. We have their names. They haven't survived. Only two survived, Jainism and Buddhism, and Buddhism, of course, became a religion in ways that Jainism did not. So why did it do that? I think one of the reasons is that it allowed members of all castes to participate in the dharma. Certainly, when we look at the monks and nuns and are able to identify their caste affiliation, most of them are from three upper castes of the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas, and mostly they are Brahmins and Kshatriyas, so they are upper caste. The Buddha himself was also from the warrior caste, the Kshatriya caste, but we see people from the lowest caste, and some of them become very famous figures.

So there's this wide appeal, but also Buddhism just allowed people to make simple offerings to monks and nuns every day with their food and receive good karma in return. So it set up a fairly simple sort of spiritual-economic exchange in which, in exchange for material support in the form of food and wealth for monasteries, you receive the spiritual capital of good karma that will cause you to be reborn, ideally in heaven. We often think that most Buddhists have wanted to achieve nirvana and escape from samsara. That's not the case. Most Buddhists over the course of history haven't really known what no-self means or have never meditated and not thought much about nirvana. They want a lifetime in heaven in which they have all sorts of wealth and pleasures and have very, very long lifetimes. So lay Buddhist practice is really not about nirvana.



It's about heaven in the next lifetime and also avoiding hell in the next lifetime. And this spiritual exchange of material support for spiritual support is what the Buddha and Buddhists then offered to everybody, and this happened across the globe as Buddhism spread. So I think that was part of it.

Finally, there's a very important element of translation. So there's a moment in which a couple of Brahmin monks come to the Buddha and say, “We hear these monks just totally mispronouncing your teachings. They don't know how to say it. It's really awful. Let us take your teachings and put them into some rhymed poems that could be memorized in a proper language.” And the Buddha said, “No, you may not do that, and in fact, if you do that, anybody who does that will be violating the monastic code. I want my teachings taught in the vernacular.” And so that meant that Buddhism could spread because it allowed translation. So it could go to Chinese, it could go to Tibetan, it could go around the world because the Buddha allowed monks to teach the dharma in their own language. That was something that did not happen, for example, in Hinduism, which had a sacred Sanskrit language and Vedas that were known only to Brahmin priests. Buddhism became accessible because of translation. And I think that was one of the major factors for its success over history and across the globe.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it's still true that although Buddhism survived as a tradition, it nonetheless went into decline in India, its home, and the history of how and why continues to be debated. So what are some of the debates around Buddhism's decline and eventual disappearance in India?

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: It's a huge, huge question and very important one, and one that we don't have entirely good answers to, and I guess to begin the conversation, we have to begin by what do we mean by Buddhism and what do we mean by disappearance?

So typically, from the side of the tradition, Buddhism means the presence of an ordained group of monks. The number is usually ten as the minimum, and those monks must gather every two



weeks to recite the monastic code. They must go on the three-month rains retreat during the monsoon as a group, and they must perform a ceremony to end that retreat at the end of the monsoon. So those are the traditional signs of the presence of the dharma in a country.

If there aren't ten monks, then there's a problem. And so when we look at Sri Lanka, for example, which we think of as one of the great Buddhist cultures, as one of the great Buddhist cultures of history, three times in the history of Sri Lanka, the order of monks died out. That is, there were not enough monks. If you don't have ten monks, you can't ordain other monks. And so once you go to nine, or if you're in a border country, it's five going down to four, but I think Sri Lanka always thought of itself as a central country. When you go below that, then you can't ordain anyone else, and then Buddhism is gone. So on those three occasions, you have to get a ship, sail to Burma or to Thailand, bring back ten monks and have them revive the order of monks by ordaining the men of Sri Lanka.

So during those times when the monastic order had been shut down in that sense, would we say that Buddhism had disappeared from Sri Lanka? No, right? They have temples, they have people making offerings to statues of the Buddha. So the question is, how do we define Buddhism when we talk about this question of disappearance? So when we come to India, the big question is, did Buddhism disappear from India? And when did that happen? And why? So again, we have a lot of things to consider here. So we have, for example, the great Tang monk Xuanzang, traveling from China to India. He's there from 627 to 645. He sees many monasteries deserted and in ruins. So we know that Buddhism was in decline in some regions of India, even during that time, and again, typically Buddhism depends on merchants. It depends, of course, on people who are going to give the support to the monks every day and build the monasteries and the temples and so forth. So this typically came from merchants, and sometimes from kings, and so if the trade route changes and there's a monastery along the trade route, there's no more merchants passing through, this is where Xuanzang would see these monasteries and ruins.



Then we come to the Kalachakra Tantra, this very important tantra. It's so important in Tibet, early 11th century. It talks already about the Muslims and how they are threatening the dharma and that one day a Buddhist army will sweep out of Shambhala in the Himalayas and defeat these barbarians and restore the dharma to the world. Dharmasvamin, this Tibetan who goes to Bodhgaya in 1234, there's nobody there except a few Sri Lankan monks who are sort of keeping things going while they hide in the jungle whenever the Muslim troops come through, and then this great abbot of Vikramashila actually saw Vikramashila sacked by the Muslims in 1204 and went to Tibet and said, Buddhism in India is over.

So how do we measure that loss? When did it happen? This is a big question that we still talk about, but it's important to know that disappearance is already there in the tradition. This is not simply a matter that historians discuss. So, the most famous of these theories of decline is from Buddhaghosa. Buddhaghosa is the author of the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Path of Purification*, one of the great authors of the Pali tradition, and he says that Buddhism will disappear over the course of five thousand years in one-thousand-year intervals.

So one thousand years after the death of the Buddha, which we would place in 544, it's impossible to become even a stream-enterer. No more once-returner, never-returner, no more arhat; the attainments are over. And it's interesting that he's writing this about almost a thousand years after the Buddha. So it's coming up in his own time, I think, in his opinion.

He then says in the second thousand years, monks are no longer able to keep their vows. So that's very significant, but that doesn't mean that Buddhism has disappeared. After three thousand years, all Buddhist texts have disappeared completely. There's no more Buddhism. As I say to my students, when you Google “Buddhism,” you get no hits three thousand years after the Buddha is gone. In the fourth thousand years, this is a beautiful and very sad image. The yellow robes of the monks turn into the white robes of laypeople. All monks become laymen. All nuns become laywomen. There's no more monasticism.



And finally, in this very moving and sad moment at the end of five thousand years, we have what's called the nirvana of the relics. So we talk about the Buddha achieving the nirvana with remainder under the Bodhi tree, because the remainder of his mind and body remained, and then without remainder when he passed away at age 80. He was cremated, and the relics were put in the stupas, and five thousand years after his passing, those stupas will all break open, they'll explode, and all the relics in all the stupas and chotens and pagodas around the world will gather, come back together under the bodhi tree, and they'll reassemble in the form of the Buddha. No humans will even notice this. They don't care. They don't even know who the Buddha is, but the gods will come and worship these relics one last time, then they'll burst into flame and be gone forever. So that's the end of the five-thousand-year period in Buddhaghosa's theory of the disappearance of the dharma.

James Shaheen: I really love that story.

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: Yeah.

James Shaheen: But, you know, one of the common, perhaps misconceptions is that the spread of Islam is solely responsible or primarily responsible. And I interviewed Johan Elverskog, a scholar whose book really argues against this notion at the very least, and it's very exaggerated.

How do you see this?

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: Well, I think, again, I think, Buddhism had been in decline for centuries before the arrival of the Muslims coming down through the Khyber Pass and raiding further and further into North India. So it really is a case of Buddhism being strong in some places, not so strong in others. Of course, we have Muslim accounts, their own accounts, of sacking monasteries, they don't know who they are, they're heathens, in North India. Nalanda, Vikramashila, those are both mentioned. But this is rather late in the history of Buddhism in India, and it's in the north, and so it's a factor toward the end. But if the king becomes a Hindu



and no longer supports the monasteries, then this is a huge problem. If the trade route shifts, if the merchants who take you around Asia are not Buddhists or if they're Muslims, as became the case, all the sea routes were controlled by Muslim ships, especially going between China and India, it's a problem, and so it's a very complicated question of what does Buddhism mean, what does disappearance mean, and certainly to place that blame entirely on Islam is completely wrong, but this is something that we find in Tibet, because many of the great teachers, Atisha, Shakyashri Bhadra, came from India to Tibet, they've seen Buddhism in decline in the north and so just escaping to Tibet. So they heard those stories from those great Indian masters and accepted them, but of course they had no idea about the previous history or what was going on in the south. And the other thing is that of course in Tibet the Kalachakra is very important and talks about this apocalyptic war in which the Muslims are defeated by the Arya Dharma.

James Shaheen: So, I mean, there is a lot of politics that finds its way into these religious texts. Is that right?

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: A lot of politics and just a kind of Islamophobia that we also find in the West, and then we find people wanting to accept that story without really doing the research to look at the earlier history.

James Shaheen: OK. So you've mentioned the five stages of decline, and you quote a passage from a Buddhist sutra on precisely this theme. So would you be willing to read that passage? It's on page 164.

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: This is from a sutra with the wonderful title, “Introduction to the Domain of the Inconceivable Qualities and Wisdom of the Tathagatas.”

“Some know the essence of the teaching of the Blessed One, while others know the Blessed One's teaching in a state of decline. Some know that ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty years have elapsed since the Blessed One taught the dharma. Some know that ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or



fifty years have elapsed since the Blessed One passed into nirvana. Some know that a hundred or a thousand years have elapsed since the Blessed One attained perfect awakening. Others know that a hundred or a thousand years have elapsed since the Blessed One passed into nirvana. Some know that ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty thousand years have elapsed since the Blessed One attained perfect awakening. Others know that ten, twenty, thirty, forty or fifty thousand years have elapsed since the Blessed One passed into nirvana. Some know that ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty hundred million eons have elapsed since the Blessed One attained perfect awakening, while others know that ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty hundred thousand million aeons have elapsed since the Blessed One passed into nirvana. The complete and perfect Buddha, in order to break the pride, conceit, and arrogance of sentient beings who have previously accumulated roots of virtue, in order to ripen their previously accumulated roots of virtue, and in order to guide them to the teaching of Tatagatha, displays the decline in disappearance of the authentic dharma of the Tatagatha.”

James Shaheen: Thank you, Don, you know, just one thing. I mean, I’m always impressed by the immensity of their concept of time where they go really over the top in describing that. The other thing is this whole notion of decline. I mean, it exists in other traditions. I mean if you read the Old Testament, of course, in terms of our longevity and even height, there's this notion of decline. Is it just a given that there will be this attenuation of the teachings the further you move from this source? Is that what's going on? Because it's not just Buddhism that says things were far better and the teachings were much purer earlier on.

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: It's sort of the purity of the origin, right? So I think that's probably true in many religions. Those who are able to be in the presence of the founder, in the presence of God's intervention in history, all of those things are there and religions around them. In the case of the Buddha, of course, it's a great blessing to have been reborn in India when he was there and then to be in his circle. All of this is talked about at great length. When Xuanzang finally arrives in Bodhgaya, he falls on the ground and weeps, saying, “Where was I in samsara when you were



here in the world and that I've arrived too late?” And so there's a great deal of nostalgia and regret about being elsewhere when the Tathagata was in the world, and then that leads to all sorts of practices that wants to bring one into the presence of Maitreya, for example, when he appears, or to go now to the pure land of Amitabha and be in his presence. So to be in the presence of a Buddha is the goal, of course, and it's a great sense of loss and regret when one is not there. And we find that, I think, as you say, in many religions, but it's very strong in Buddhism because of the idea of impermanence and the long spans of time.

James Shaheen: Yeah, sometimes the Buddha simply says one word, and somebody becomes enlightened, and so all of these practices develop as if, “Well, what a shame we don't have the Buddha, but we have these teachings,” and it's far more arduous a task to become enlightened, and so the the longing for the Buddha in his absence becomes central. You know, as one contemporary example of this dynamic, you close the book with an example of the thousand stones found in an oil drum at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, that were later determined to spell out the first six fascicles of the *Lotus Sutra*, which is pretty impressive. Can you tell us that story? What can it teach us about Buddhist understandings of the tradition's eventual disappearance?

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: Right, so this was Heart Mountain, which was the site of one of the detention camps for Japanese American citizens during the Second World War. So this is a place in a very remote part of Wyoming, very cold. They just lived in these plywood shelters over the course of the war. When the war was over, this land was then sold off to various ranchers and farmers, and someone got a big piece of equipment to just plow the land, and he heard this huge screeching sound. He got out of his piece of equipment and saw that he had sheared off the top of a big rusty oil drum that had been buried and that the oil drum was filled with hundreds and hundreds of little white stones, and each of those stones had a different Chinese character on it. So eventually it was determined that when you put these stones in the right order, it was the first section of the *Lotus Sutra*.



So this seems very strange to us. Why would someone do this and then bury it? But when we know something about, again, the disappearance of dharma and about the passage of time, we know that in Japan, there is a long practice of taking canisters of metal or stone and placing sutras inside of those and then burying them for Maitreya. Maitreya is the next Buddha, and he will not appear for, according to most calculations, almost six billion years. So these are almost time capsules that you bury for Maitreya so that he will have the sutras when he arrives. Of course, we would think that as the next Buddha, he should know those sutras already, and so why they're there as these aides-mémoires is an interesting question, but just something that is done in Japan as a way of making merit, you copy a sutra off in your own hand ideally and bury that text in something that's supposed to be very permanent so it will be there when he finally comes, and he can then unearth it and have that sutra.

That's the story that begins the chapter called writing, which is the last chapter in the book, and in many ways, I wanted to have that story at the end because amidst all of these ideas of the decline of the dharma and the disappearance we've been talking about, I wanted to leave on this sort of hopeful note that Maitreya is coming, and from the point of view, of course, of the poor prisoners in this camp, that giant barrel of stones was put unearthed far too early. But there are others that have been buried that will be recovered by Maitreya when he comes to his role to restore the dharma once again.

James Shaheen: You know, I know it's an entirely different tradition, and it's one that you specialize in, Tibetan Buddhism, it's very different from the Japanese traditions, but it reminds me of termas. Maybe you could say something about that.

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: So this is a different phenomenon because when we see Tibetans starting to go to India to receive teachings from the great masters of Bengal and Kashmir and bringing those back to Tibet, these become very important figures. These teachings become centers of the sect of Tibetan Buddhism that we know, but there were those who didn't go. There were those who remained behind, and they had no text from India. However, they did believe that when



Padmasambhava had been in Tibet much earlier, Padmasambhava called the second Buddha, he had buried texts around Tibet to be unearthed at the appropriate time.

The Tibetans were ready to receive these teachings, and these were, from their perspective, authentic teachings of a Buddha. So they didn't have to go to India and make that difficult trip and worry about the brigands and the snakes and the diseases. They had the teachings of a Buddha in their own land, which they could unearth. Those texts were written in a secret Dakini language, in a script that only they could understand. They had to translate that into classical Tibetan. So it's the idea, you're right, of buried texts being unearthed at the appropriate time. In the case of Tibet, we don't know exactly how that happened and where these came from, but it's certainly so important to the Nyingma sect of Buddhism.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it also seems like a strategy that so many religions deploy, and that's to authenticate the texts and say that they were actually from the source.

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: Well, I wrote a book called *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography*, in which I compared the dharma phenomenon to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

James Shaheen: Right. I thought of the same thing. You know, he'd put his head into a paper bag and channel these teachings.

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: He unearthed the book, and then he had to put on special glasses to actually read.

James Shaheen: Yeah, so it just seems like a human thing to do.

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: Absolutely.

James Shaheen: I wanted to ask you one more question. You know, it's funny. You told our producer, Sarah Fleming, and me that you would do this interview, but only if we read the entire 500-page book, which actually turned out to be a great pleasure. But the way I read it might not



have been how you intended it, although maybe you did. Each of these five-thousand-word essays can be read by themselves, and so I just went to the ones first that I was interested in. It was less intimidating to take it on this way, so I went to the ones that I was interested in first, like I was really interested in Devadatta, I was interested in disappearance, and then I began reading them, not necessarily in order. I did read the last one last. I mean, that was a nice way to end. But how do you see the reader approaching the book? Because it's so full of stories and very compelling stories, and each essay can be read on its own.

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: That was the idea, so you did exactly what I had hoped. As you saw, the titles are simply abstract nouns that, after the first titled history, are simply placed in alphabetical order. It's sort of an interlocking sort of network of stories that make reference to each other sometimes, but not others. And so it's fine to read them out of order. That's the idea. Each one is a self-contained essay. But what I wanted to do was really, as you saw, start many of the chapters in the present time or in an unusual place and then show how Buddhism was implicated in whatever that particular historical moment was, and then come back to that moment at the end. So I really wanted to show how even though Buddhism disappeared from India, at some point, whatever disappearance means, despite the fact that we know so little about the history of Buddhism in India, the dharma that we have from India is found all over the world, right? And I'm trying to show how that dharma appears in unusual times and places, in historically important times and places, and the way that that's occurred over the past 2,500 years.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you know, I felt I had permission to read it that way because you described the book as a thirty-piece puzzle that the reader may assemble, disassemble, and reassemble at will. So I thought, well, OK, that's how I'm going to read it, and it worked. You're one of those scholars who can take the fruits of your study and present it in a very accessible way to a readership, so I just would like everyone listening to know this is not an inaccessible book meant only for scholars. In fact, I take it you meant for everyone to read this, Don. Is that correct?

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Donald S. Lopez Jr.: Yeah.

James Shaheen: OK, anything else before we close?

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: I think that's pretty much it.

James Shaheen: I think we got a lot done. OK, so Don Lopez, thanks so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Buddhism: A Journey through History*, you won't regret it, available now.

Donald S. Lopez Jr.: Thank you, James.

James Shaheen: Thanks, Don.

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