

**TWO BOOK REVIEWS OF:
NAVAJO AND TIBETAN SACRED WISDOM: THE CIRCLE OF THE SPIRIT
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NAVAJO AND TIBETAN SACRED WISDOM: A BOOK REVIEW

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Peter Gold has written a beautiful and scholarly book called "Navajo and Tibetan Sacred Wisdom: The Circle of the Spirit."

Gold was fascinated with the idea of comparing two cultures that live at the opposite ends of the earth while sharing my similar insights. Both societies live on the world's highest inhabited plateaus and share deeply spiritual ways of life filled with wisdom, rituals, and art that produce observable results in the lives of the people.

Gold writes:

Tibetan and Navajo life is a process of constant re-balancing and perfecting of one's actions expressions, and thoughts into an ideal state as befits each culture's ultimate role models ... Both groups see the process of living as a spiritual journey, an individual and communal effort to develop each person into the best version of him or herself, in the company of like-minded people dedicated to the integration of matter and spirit.

Gold observes that both cultures lack our word "religion," which literally means to bind back, to link back. In the Tibetan and Navajo cultures, spirituality is a way of life, and there is no sense of linking back to anything. This sense of full and present participation in a spiritual way of living contrasts sharply with Western culture where religion is often seen as a counter-force to everyday life, where being spiritual means being different and having to swim against the current.

Both the Tibetans and the Navajos perceive life as a journey toward the unity of matter and spirit, real and ideal. The Tibetans use two words to express this ideal state of being: "tashi," a harmonious relationship with the universe, and "sangye se," Buddha nature or enlightenment. The Navajos, on the other hand, use the word "hozho" or "beauty" to describe an "empowered state of the deities, immune from physical and mental suffering."

Gold reflects,

We too have terms for this most essential goal of living. The mystics call this state of mind illumination, and its state of being, holiness. The etymology of our word 'holiness,' which derives from the same old Anglo-Saxon root as do 'heal' and 'whole,' also reveals the universality operating at the heart of the Navajo and Tibetan spiritual paths. In their

perennial philosophies, matter and spirit, body and mind, self and cosmos, I and thou are inseparable. As such, to attend to one means to involve the other.

Gold's thesis is that there are four universal principles underlying spiritual paths around the world and that these principles are plainly evident in the vital spiritual traditions of the Tibetan and the Navajos. Gold calls these four principles the Circle of the Spirit. Here are the four underlying principles:

1) "Awakening and Connecting to the Nature of Things"

This awakening refers to the first awareness of the unity of all things, of the one creative life force that flows through all living things.

2) "Balancing and Unifying Earth with Sky"

Earth and sky are used symbolically to represent the universal, polar energies of mother and father, female and male, matter and spirit, time and eternity.

Tibetan and Navajo spiritual teachings place major emphasis on the unity of the two, with the spiritual path wending its way in between.

3) "Centering in the Mandala of Self and Cosmos"

This principle involves balancing and unifying earth and sky — the paradoxical and seemingly conflicting forces of our beings — by centering in the mandala of self and cosmos. Both the Navajos and the Tibetans create mandalas that symbolically reveal how to balance and unify the imperfect outer world and a sacred and ideal inner world.

4) "Becoming: Sacred Rites of Transformation"

Gold observes that understanding these principles will never create a vital spiritual experience or a transforming way of life. Something more is needed to bring an individual

onto a specific daily spiritual path, one formulated to bolster the body/mind's inner strengths and defeat its self-destructive weaknesses.

Both the Tibetans and the Navajos have developed vast traditions of knowledge and sacred rites of transformation. Gold writes,

But most of their spiritual lineages, called 'haatal,' or 'chantway,' by the Navajo and 'gyud' or 'tantra' by the Tibetans, are geared to orchestrating a transformative spiritual journey into the ideal world with a return into the maelstrom of the real world as an empowered (healed, whole, and holy) person.

Gold refers to these four principles as the Circle of the Spirit for the following reason. Both cultures depict concentric circles, a small, inner circle connected to an outer, larger one by means of four lines, creating four quadrants. Gold writes,

The smaller circle is the microcosm, the finite body/mind or self, yet it is also the source of all awareness and life. The larger circle is the macrocosm, the infinite body/mind of the universe and, simultaneously, the fully expanded individual on the spiritual path.

What then are the results of this spiritual path in the lives of the Tibetans and the Navajos? What benefits would entice us to step onto the path of spiritual transformation? Gold offers the following quotes from objective observers:

The anthropologist Gary Witherspoon observed of the Navajo that which is also true of the Tibetan:

If a Navajo is to be truly healthy and happy, beauty must dominate his thought and speech, and harmony must permeate his environment. Beauty flows from the mind or inner form of a person. Navajos have radiant personalities and the beauty they have within themselves seems to radiate from the inner core of their being. This can be readily seen in firsthand observation or even in photographs."

Consider the following comment by Thubten Jigme Norbu (Tagtser Rinpoche):

I think of Tibet as a beautiful country, and so it is, but the greatest beauty to me is that the people live a life dedicated to religion. You know it when you meet them, without being told. There is a warmth that touches you, a power that fills you with new strength, a peace that is gentle. I remember such people, and I feel sad that now it is so seldom one meets their like.

I will bring this lengthy book report to a close with three quotes.

If we want to help the world we have to make a personal journey. It is up to each of us individually to find the meaning of enlightened society and how it can be realized.

— Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche

There is no alternative [to ultimate happiness] other than the spiritual way. We must make a strong determination to practice.

— The XIV Dalai Lama

The following is a Navajo prayer used at the end of many ceremonies and tribal council gatherings:

In beauty may we dwell. In beauty may we walk. In beauty may our male kindred dwell. In beauty may our female kindred dwell. In beauty may it rain on our young men. In beauty may it rain on our young women. In beauty may it rain on our chiefs. In beauty may it rain on us. In beauty may our corn grow. In the trail of pollen may it rain. In beauty all around us may it rain. In beauty may we walk. The beauty is restored. The beauty is restored. The beauty is restored. The beauty is restored.

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Review by Van Sluijs, Sharon M.

Title: *Navajo and Tibetan Sacred Wisdom: The Circle of the Spirit*.
by Peter Gold. Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 1994. Pp. 334, color and b&w illustrations,
\$29.95, paper.

Social scientists, insofar as they practice "science," often place themselves in the role of observer--spectator, even--of the human societies they study. Unlike the insensate subjects of chemists or physicists, however, humans are aware of the oftentimes intrusive presence of their curious audience. What the scientist/spectator witnesses is not the true character of the people, but rather that group's response to intrusion. The gathered information is then evaluated and codified with the secular Western platform as the "neutral" base of validity. The ways of a people are reduced to ethnically specific "symbols" and finally simply to "data."

Peter Gold, who studied with Dr. Margaret Mead and is trained as an anthropologist and ethnomusicologist, most thoroughly avoids this role in his research and writing. For three decades he has lived with and studied the living traditions of Tibetans, Native Americans in the American Southwest, Alaskan Inuits, and others. His latest book, *Navajo and Tibetan Sacred Wisdom*, a comprehensive and accessible work of comparative spirituality, reveals not only his deep understanding of these traditions, but also his intimate personal connection to both the Navajo and Tibetan people.

Gold's main premise is seemingly radical: that the rituals and spiritual practices of the Tibetan and Navajo people correspond to one another in ways far too numerous to be mere coincidence. His purpose is ambitious: to introduce and elucidate the spiritual traditions of both peoples, and to reveal the startling similarities between them. A second purpose is to contrast the guiding beliefs of the Tibetans and Navajo with Western beliefs regarding the universe and the human role in it.

There are obvious similarities between the Navajo and Tibetans. Both are peoples whose lives are intimately connected to their lands, and their lands are extraordinary: towering mountains, the expansive dome of the sky, and the winds, sometimes gentle, sometimes ferocious. The Tibetan plateau in central Asia contains the highest land on earth. Gold has called it, in an earlier book, the "altar of the earth." The Navajo live in the American Southwest, in an area dominated by mountains, canyons, and evocative rock formations sculpted by centuries of wind. Both people use techniques of arid agriculture; herding and nomadic groups are present in both cultures. There is also a possible racial similarity.

In the less visible realm of spiritual traditions, the parallels and similarities between the Navajo and Tibetans become striking. Both people believe that humans contain an inborn divinity, though this aspect may be obstructed by deluded thinking and unbalanced living. Their spiritual practices speak to awakening, nurturing, and realizing that divine state. A man or woman who attains this state also comes to see the entire world as a harmonious, balanced cosmos in which

everything is interconnected, meaningful, and beautiful. The Navajo--or Dine--call this "The Beauty Way": *Bikeh hozho*, the ideal state of being. In Buddhism, one attains enlightenment, or in Tibetan *sangye se*, one's "Buddha nature."

Gold writes that all spiritual practices of the Navajo and Tibetans may be seen as supporting four aims. First, they reveal the interconnectedness of all beings. Secondly, they reconcile apparent opposites: male/ female, celestial/ terrestrial, ideal/ mundane, mental/ physical. This is the ancient concept one finds throughout central Asia of "joining heaven and earth," and is most familiar to us in the Taoist yin-yang symbol. Thirdly, the practices provide means to harmonious and balanced living through recognition of one's own divine nature. Finally, rites of initiation and subsequent daily practice transform the practitioner. One comes to identify oneself with a deity and to see the world as it is--divine, through divine eyes.

Gold finds numerous equivalencies of color, symbol, method, belief, and motive. For example, the Navajo deity Talking God, *Hashch'eelti'i* (essentially, according to Gold, the god of "thought"), bears a striking resemblance to the Buddhist deity *Vajrasattva* (here called "Diamond Being"), symbolizing the incisive mind of enlightenment. Calling God, *Hashch'eoghan*, the nurturer of life, harvest, and home, is likened to *Amitayus*, *Amitabha*, and *Avalokitesvara* (here called "Boundless Life," "Boundless Light," and "Boundless Love"). In one long, detailed section, which includes charts illustrating a similarity of sequence and purpose, Gold directly compares (and equates) the Navajo Night Way rite, essentially a healing ritual, and the Tibetan *Kalachakra* initiation.

It is perhaps misguided to focus on these similarities as amazing, strange, or uncanny. Some, including this reviewer, would argue that because the Navajo and Tibetan spiritual practices both contain strong shamanistic elements (the Buddhism of Tibet representing the eighth-century marriage of the older indigenous shamanistic *Bon-po* with Indian Buddhism), they would, of course, resemble one another, as they would many other shamanistic cultures. *Mircea Eliade's* exhaustive work, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, indicates that shamanism worldwide is startlingly homogeneous. And rather than pointing to some historical contact and exchange of ideas between groups, this homogeneity more strongly suggests an agreement of human experience; it is a widely experienced perception of reality--perhaps this simply is what is.

The Navajo and Tibetans live in constant contact with the sacred. What is amazing is that they still exist, in the face of monstrous forces bent on their "compliance," that is, the obliteration of their world view and way of life. For this reason alone, Gold's book would be worthy of attention, for he suggests that by following the example of their lives, lived on principles of harmony and balance, love and compassion, we may see our way back, recovering our connection with old traditions that revere all life, human and otherwise, and that seek unity, rather than domination, as a goal.

Navajo and Tibetan Sacred Wisdom is oversized, handsomely designed, and profusely illustrated. The wide margins of nearly every page contain line drawings and illuminating quotations, and there are scores of stunning photographs of both Tibet and the Navajo lands—often the author's own. It is an attractive and engaging piece of work, impossible to read without sensing Gold's long connection, deep understanding, and focused enthusiasm concerning his bond with both peoples.

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