



**From Ego to Enlightenment:
The Spiritual Rebirth of Heinrich Harrer
in Seven Years in Tibet**

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Abstract:

Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian mountaineer who is stuck in Tibet following the start of World War II, is the subject of the film Seven Years in Tibet. Harrer undergoes a significant spiritual development as a result of his encounters with the teachings of the Buddha and Dalai Lama when he is in Tibet. The film examines the concepts of compassion, nonviolence, and spiritual rebirth. Harrer initially views Buddhism with suspicion, but over time he learns to value the profundity of the Buddha's teachings. He gains the ability to let go of his ego and attachment to material belongings, and he begins to understand how everything is interconnected. Another important aspect of the film is how the Dalai Lama is portrayed. A living Buddha, the Dalai Lama stands for the highest principles of kindness and nonviolence. The Dalai Lama's knowledge and kindness have a lasting impression on Harrer, who starts to look up to him as a role model. The transformational potential of spirituality is explored in the movie Seven Years in Tibet. It implies that it is never too late to find true happiness and that the movie's message is one of hope and redemption.

Keywords: Ego, quest, spirituality, rebirth, nonviolence, compassion.



Introduction

In 1997, Jean-Jacques Annaud released the biographical war drama film *Seven Years in Tibet*. It is based on Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian mountaineer and SS sergeant, who wrote the memoir *Seven Years in Tibet* in 1952 about his experiences in Tibet between 1944 and 1951. The movie stars Brad Pitt as Harrer and David Thewlis as Aufschnaiter with music by John Williams and a featured performance by cellist Yo-Yo Ma,

The movie is about Austrian mountaineer Harrer, who becomes stuck in Tibet as World War II starts. Harrer has a deep spiritual shift as a result of his encounters with the Buddha and Dalai Lama's teachings when he is in Tibet. Despite Harrer's initial skepticism toward Buddhism, he eventually comes to appreciate the profundity of the Buddha's teachings. He gains the ability to release his ego and attachment to material belongings, and he begins to understand how everything is interconnected. So, how does Harrer's time in Tibet result in a spiritual awakening? What are the Dalai Lama and Harrer's perspectives on spirituality like and how are they different? Also, what are the consequences of Harrer's experiences in Tibet for our understanding of spirituality?

A Journey of Spiritual Rebirth and Interconnectedness

According to *Seven Years in Tibet*, spirituality is not just something that monks and nuns' practice. It is something that everybody can access, regardless of background or views. Thereby, a great force for good in the world, can be found in spirituality. The character of Heinrich Harrer serves as a vehicle for exploring the idea of spiritual rebirth in the film *Seven Years in Tibet*. By being originally materialistic, arrogant and selfish, Harrer has a deep spiritual development due to his experience in Tibet. He gains the ability to realize that everything is profoundly interconnected and frees himself of his material possessions and ego. "Interconnectedness is the understanding that everything is connected to everything else, and that we are all part of a greater whole." (Thich Nhat Hanh 13).

"Interconnectedness" describes the idea of linking or joining many different components, systems, or concepts in a network or complex structure. It is an essential concept across multiple academic disciplines and, depending on the context, can have many different meanings. Indeed, there are a few instances of how interconnectedness is perceived in different academic contexts:

-Interconnection in computer science and networking: It often refers to the joining of different kinds of computers or devices so that they may communicate and utilize resources. This includes ideas like network interconnection, in which several networks are linked to facilitate data flow, or integrating hardware elements within a computer system to guarantee effective communication between them.



-Ecology and biology: In both of these fields, interconnectivity frequently refers to the connections and interactions between different species within an ecosystem. It examines how symbiotic interactions, food chains, and the movement of nutrients and energy within an ecosystem reveal the connections between distinct creatures.

-Economics: The concept of interconnection in economics refers to the notion that different economic factors, such as supply and demand, interest rates, and governmental policies, are interrelated and may have reverberating effects on one another. It is a key idea in comprehending how economic systems work.

-Social Sciences: In the social sciences, interconnection can be used to describe the connections that exist between people, groups, and societies due to social, cultural, economic, and political links. It is crucial for understanding how societies and their institutions function.

-Environmental Science: The notion of interconnection in environmental science refers to the knowledge that many elements of the environment, such as air, water, land, and ecosystems, are interconnected. Changes, in one area of the environment, might have an impact on other areas and this is essential for solving environmental problems.

-Information Systems: Interconnection in the context of information systems refers to combining different software and hardware components into a larger system for smooth data transmission and functionality. This notion is fundamental in the development of integrated and effective systems for information technology.

Hence, in works like “A Thousand Plateaus,” which he co-wrote with Félix Guattari, Deleuze challenges conventional ideas of identity, causation, and linearity. His interconnection-focused ideology emphasizes the following components: Rhizomatic Thinking; Difference and Multiplicity; Becoming; Desire and Intensity; and Nomadism. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

The meeting between Harrer and the Dalai Lama is among the most important times in the former’s spiritual development. The Dalai Lama is a living Buddha who embodies the greatest principles of compassion and non-violence. The Dalai Lama’s knowledge and kindness leave a lasting impression on Harrer, who starts to look up to him as a role model. The movie thereby implies that anyone who is prepared to open their hearts and minds to new possibilities might experience spiritual rebirth. Even though Harrer has flaws, his spiritual journey ultimately helps him find purpose in life and discover true happiness. In fact, the Dalai Lama and Harrer both emphasize the value of kindness, nonviolence, and the interconnectedness of all things. However, there are several areas where their opinions diverge. Harrer, for instance, is more concerned with the path to enlightenment of the individual, whereas the Dalai Lama is more concerned with the place of Buddhism in society.



“The movie *Seven Years in Tibet* is a powerful exploration of the theme of spiritual rebirth. Harrer’s journey is a reminder that we can all find true happiness and meaning in life if we are willing to let go of our attachments and open ourselves to new possibilities” (Smith 123)

Compassion

The subject of compassion is also explored in the film *Seven Years in Tibet*. The capacity for empathy and the desire to lend a hand to others is compassion. It is one of the fundamental principles of Buddhism and it is highly regarded in the Tibetan culture.

Through his interactions with the Tibetan people, Harrer gains compassion. He learns to value the significance of compassion in their life as he observes how they are able to coexist peacefully with nature and one another. “Compassion is the wish for the happiness of all beings”. (The Buddha, Dhammapada, verse 190).

The film makes the case that developing compassion is crucial to achieving world peace and harmony. We are more likely to help people and work for a better world when we are able to feel compassion for them. Jones views the movie’s depiction of the Tibetan people is particularly inspiring. They are a people who have been through a great deal of hardship, but they have never lost their compassion for others. “This is a lesson that we can all learn from.” (Jones 139).



Figure 1: Harrer and the Dalai Lama are having deep talks about different issues.

Tibet, sometimes referred to as the “Roof of the World,” evokes feelings akin to ascending a colorful, medieval castle—an imaginative building rising



majestically above Asia. This high land is a tribute to the force of nature and the harmonious integration of geographic and cultural significance, with its formidable topography and breath-taking heights. Entering Tibet's highlands is like ascending a derelict old castle—every step is visible to the keen viewer. There's a feeling of transcending time in this rough and uneven terrain, broken up by massive mountain ranges; it's as though the stones underfoot are echoes of bygone eras. This geological tapestry, with its many crags and crevices, tells an account of resilience and has shaped an environment that has seen the rise and fall of entire civilizations.

Tibet's mighty reign guards the central region of the Asian continent from its strategic location. It provides an expansive viewpoint that extends beyond reality, akin to the ramparts of a medieval fortress. This viewpoint offers a spectacular perspective of the surrounding landscapes and serves as a shelter for rituals that have endured the tests of time, representing the historical and cultural value of Tibet. In a word, Tibet turns into a symbolic stronghold—a harmonious combination of rugged culture and breathtaking scenery. Its moniker as the “Roof of the World” alludes to a profound tie between the physical and the spiritual, and also between height and immateriality. With the sounds of history resonating off the towering peaks and expansive plains, inspiring wonder and introspection, strolling through this amazing place is like journeying through space and time.

Non-violence

The concept of non-violence is also explored in the film *Seven Years in Tibet*. Nonviolence is the conviction that there is always room for nonviolent conflict resolution and that there is never a justification for using force. Harrier's experiences with the Dalai Lama teach him about nonviolence. The Dalai Lama, a strong proponent of non-violence, shows Harrier that it is possible to defend your beliefs without using force. The movie makes the case that nonviolence can change the world for the better. Peacefully resolving conflicts render the world fairer and more compassionate for everyone.

The cultural worldview of Tibet is based on the idea that enemies serve as essential teachers who help people develop qualities like patience and compassion. Their societal ethos is firmly rooted in this belief system. Furthermore, in spite of the difficulties posed by the Chinese presence, the Tibetans continue to have a firm belief in the protective powers of their religious traditions.

Before the Chinese general's arrival, Lahsa, the cultural center, becomes the center of laborious and complicated holy rites. The significance of the upcoming visit is marked by these traditions that are performed all across the city. The Tibetans are making incredibly realistic statues of venerated deities which is one of the remarkable cultural expressions. These laboriously created butter sculptures show how creative talent and religious devotion can coexist.



It's interesting to note how the sculptures change as they progressively melt when they are exposed to the heat of the sun. In Tibetan culture, this metamorphosis is a potent symbol that captures the idea of impermanence that forms the basis of their intellectual and spiritual beliefs. The melting sculptures emphasize the impermanence inherent in existence and the transitory nature of earthly manifestations by serving as concrete reflections of the transient nature of everything in the material world. The Tibetan worldview is deeply rooted in culture and philosophy, and this powerful symbolism serves to reinforce the idea that everything is subject to change and that nothing is permanent.

In the filmic sequence that starts from (1:42:28 to 1:45:06), a turning point occurs in the vast hall with its elaborate carpets and the faint scent of incense lingering in the air. The Chinese General, who is used to the strict hierarchies of military discipline, sits poised and unflinching in front of the Dalai Lama's lofty seat. His refusal to bow down before the spiritual leader reflects his fundamental ideas in status and authority.

Representing humility and deep insight, the Dalai Lama notices the General's unease. Perceiving the gap caused by cultural conventions and power dynamics, he sees a chance for a different kind of communication—one that cuts across hierarchy and position. The Dalai Lama gracefully steps down from his lofty seat. His action is straightforward but impactful deed that communicates a lot without using words. Here, the spiritual guide shows that he is prepared to engage with the General on an equal basis—not in a physical sense, but rather in a dimension that goes beyond hierarchical boundaries.

The General is impressed by the Dalai Lama's humility and respect after being initially surprised by this unexpected gift. It contradicts everything he believes to be true about leadership and authority. By taking a seat at the same level as everyone else, the Dalai Lama breaks down hierarchical boundaries and creates a true space for communication and understanding.

Through this modest but important gesture, the Dalai Lama conveys a message that goes much beyond words—one of respect, equality, and the universality of relationships. It develops into an important moment, a representation of the possibility for respect and understanding amongst people, regardless of social roles or positions of power. Deeply moved by this gesture, the General starts to see the Dalai Lama not only as a religious leader but also as a fellow human being who is trying to find common ground and understanding despite their differences.

The Dalai Lama says to the harsh Chinese general:

“Until I attain my majority, the regent is the political leader of Tibet. You should have requested an audience with him... to discuss these important matters of the world. My experience of such things is limited. I am a simple Buddhist monk. All I know is the scripture and the words of lord Buddha. He goes on, “All beings tremble before danger and death. Life is dear to all when a man considers



this, he does not kill or cause to kill. You must understand. these words are ingrained in the heart of every Tibetan. It is why we are a peaceful people who reject violence on principle. I pray you will see this is our greatest strength not our weakness. I thank you for your visit. An offering to the enlightened ones.” (*Seven Years in Tibet* 1997)

In the same vein, Gandhi says, “Non-violence is not a garment to be put on and off at will. It is an attitude of mind.” (Gandhi 33). King also thinks that “Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man.” (King 88).

At first, Heinrich Harrer had doubts about Buddhism. He had no prior knowledge of Eastern philosophy because he had been nurtured in a secular home. But the more time he spent in Tibet, the more he was drawn to the profundity of the Buddha’s teachings. Buddhism’s focus on compassion struck Harrer as one of its early characteristics. The Buddha taught that because all beings are interrelated, we should treat them with compassion and kindness. For Harrer’s character was greatly influenced by his upbringing in a hostile and violent culture. He may have picked up certain characteristics from his upbringing, such as arrogance and a sense of superiority, as coping methods for survival and self-preservation. Being conceited may have been considered as a means of asserting oneself and obtaining respect or recognition in a culture where hostility and aggression were prevalent. Apparently, his arrogance was an attempt to project confidence or domination in a society that placed a great importance on strength and power. People who grew up in hostile environments may have felt pressure to prove themselves all the time, which could have resulted in an inflated sense of self-importance. Furthermore, in a society where resources may have been limited, people may have learned to be selfish by prioritizing their own needs over those of others. Harrer’s selfish inclinations may have been elevated by the necessity of a “me-first” mentality. However, he also found Buddhism’s emphasis on mindfulness to be appealing. The Buddha advocated for being mindful of our thoughts, feelings, and current deeds. “Mindfulness is the awareness that arises when paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally.” (Kabat-Zinn 4).

Harrer struggled to understand this idea, but he finally realized the advantages of mindfulness. He discovered that it made his life less stressful and anxious and more tranquil and harmonious. The more his grasp of Buddhism grew, the more Harrer’s perspective on the world changed. He gained an understanding of how everything is interconnected, and his compassion for other people grew. He started to meditate more frequently and discovered that it increased his sense of well-being. After a while in Tibet, Harrer came to deeply value its teachings. He eventually came to regard Buddhism as a path to enlightenment and thought it would provide a more tranquil and harmonious world.



Like Heinrich Harrer, what makes Algren's experience special, in the film, *The Last Samurai* 2003, is that at first, he didn't understand what the Samurai way of life was all about. After being fully immersed in the Samurai village, he begins to slowly absorb the deep meaning that is contained in the Samurai way of life. His newfound understanding manifests as an awakening to the complex aspects that make up the Samurai identity—a knowledge that leads to a respect of the philosophy that guides their way of life. That is to say, over the course of his stay in the Samurai village, Algren's comprehension of the Samurai code clearly changes. As he starts to understand, being a true Samurai means more than just being a skilled fighter; it means being devoted to a strict code of moral principles. He discovers that fighting skill is not the only thing that matters. There is also a spiritual aspect that includes mental peace—a goal that is representative of the Samurai culture.

As aforementioned before, Harrer made gradual progress toward freeing his ego and connection to material things. He started by engaging in mindfulness exercises, which made him more conscious of his thoughts and emotions. In the poignant sequence when Peka asks him to take off his clothes while standing in front of his fellow countryman, Peter, it becomes apparent that her wish goes beyond just taking off their clothes. Symbolically, Peka, the only Tailor in Tibet, invites them to throw off their clothes and also the last remnants of Western ideology, customs, and standards.

This act of transformation manifests as a symbolic call to abandon the cultural constraints that limited their views within the framework of their Western civilization. Peka's appeal transforms into a subtle cry for freedom, a request to break free from deeply rooted mental habits and cultural norms that have become imprinted in their beings.

The process of undressing takes on great significance in this symbolic gesture; it's like a ritualistic shedding of the layers of acculturation that have molded their perspective. It seems as though the clothes, which stand for Western norms, slide away to reveal a canvas free of the prejudices and preconceptions shaped by their cultural background.

When analyzing this symbolic meeting from an academic perspective, it becomes necessary to acknowledge the deeper meaning behind Peka's request—a call for a metaphysical undressing, a transformative disrobing of cultural prejudices rather than just a change in clothing. It encourages reflection on the universality of the human experience, going beyond the boundaries of Western culture and accepting a deeper, more harmonious comprehension of what it means to be human.

Harrer's perspective changed dramatically when he studied Buddhism more deeply. He started to understand how everything is interconnected to everything else, which led to an increased level of empathy for other people. Furthermore, he



realized that material possessions are not necessary to achieve true happiness, which caused him to remove his attachment to these things.

Throughout his journey, Harrer underwent a remarkable metamorphosis as he worked through the difficult process of letting go of his ego and distancing himself from material things. This metamorphic stage signaled his comeback as a man with an enhanced sense of love and peace, a sign of a developed inner state. The journey hence instilled in him a fresh wellspring of satisfaction and a heightened sense of autonomy—that is, a greater sense of autonomy resulting from his life experiences.

Also, during the filmic sequence that runs from (1:01:42 to 1:02:44), the camera skillfully adopts a bird's-eye view perspective, creating an aesthetically arresting image. Harrer's figure is rendered beautifully against the picturesque Tibetan landscape, poised on the wall of the structure, while Peka, positioned below, draws her gaze away from his feat of strength. Her posture conveys a sense of detachment rather than rapture, suggesting that she may even be inclined to question Harrer's conduct.

The camera gives the scene an air of grandeur, mimicking the elegant movements of a bird in flight. Every element is brilliantly illuminated by the daylight, giving the interactions between the people and the surroundings a striking clarity. By evidently displaying his prowess, Harrer uses ropes to traverse the building's exterior, demonstrating his skill and agility.

Peka's answer deviates from the anticipated story of adoration, though. Her withdrawal from Harrer's performance suggests a subtler relationship at work, one that deviates from expectations. Her behaviors indicate that she is not impressed by his expertise but rather that she is willing to reprimand or challenge him, which could undermine his ego-driven presentation. The situation gains depth from this delicately different take on the expected admiration, as friction or conflict is introduced to enhance the character dynamics.

A complicated interplay between characters is highlighted by the purposeful juxtaposition of Harrer's physical demonstration versus Peka's indifference or corrective stance—a departure from the expected response that adds dimensions to their relationship dynamics. Their complex characterization helps us comprehend their goals, personalities, and the changing dynamics within the greater narrative arc.

Harrer: That way you will never fall. It's perfect.

Peka: Still, walking up mountains is a fool's pleasure, Heinrich.

Harrer: No, so foolish, really... Look at this (showing her photos of his medals, awards and records) that's after I climbed the Eiger North Face. That's Olympics, Gold medal....



Peka: Then, this is another great difference between our civilization and yours...You admire the man...who pushes his way to the top in any walk of life...while we admire the man who abandons his ego... (*Seven Years in Tibet* 1997)

Peka's articulate speech reveals a deep gap between cultural norms and highlights divergent perspectives on how to measure personal achievement and social acceptance. Her insightful observation underscores an essential distinction in how civilizations differ from one another, capturing different views on what success means and the qualities that are valued in each society.

Peka's statement captures a contradiction based on the different values that each society holds. She draws attention to a difference in cultural standards for reverence and respect. Her cultural worldview emphasizes the giving up of the self, represented by shunning pride and embracing humility, rather than the success of ego-driven ambition. "The ego is a false self. It is the product of our thoughts and conditioning. It is not who we really are." (Tolle 15).

Her assertion is not limited to a comparison of cultural values; rather, it encompasses a more comprehensive philosophical perspective. Peka's argument suggests an appreciation for different set of values, one that emphasizes modesty, self-absorption, and abstinence from extravagant behavior. Her statement implies that in her culture, the one who gives up ego, keeps quiet in the face of contempt or misfortune, and has a lowly demeanor is the one to be admired.

Peka's description of this cultural gap illuminates complex ideas about achievement and social acceptance. One civilization exalts the virtues of modesty, selflessness, and the rejection of ego-driven endeavors, while another glorifies the aspirational ascent to prominence, elevating individuals who aggressively pursue achievement and fame. Peka's analysis provokes reflection on the diverse standards of success and the complex web of values that support popular awe and respect in many cultural contexts.

With Harrer's increasing immersion in the teachings of Buddhism, his perspective underwent a radical change characterized by an increased consciousness of interdependence. The more he learned, the more he realized how interconnectedness is woven throughout everything. His empathy for other people significantly expanded as a result of this epiphany, which was supported by a deep understanding of the interconnectedness that all living things share.

His developing understanding went beyond interpersonal relationships to include a keen awareness of humanity's mutually beneficial interaction with the environment. A deep understanding of the subsequent effects of human undertakings on the delicate balance of the environment was fostered by Harrer's growing awareness of the complex network connecting human acts to the natural world.



Conclusion

The film *Seven Years in Tibet* is a powerful and compelling work of art that inspires hope and salvation in its viewers. The movie makes the point that even if we have committed mistakes in the past, it is never too late to discover true happiness. Thus, the message of the film is one of forgiveness and redemption. It implies that, despite past mistakes, it is never too late to attain true happiness. The movie implies that spirituality is about finding our own way to enlightenment and leading a life of kindness and non-violence rather than adhering to a set of rules or ideas. The film's message also serves as a guiding light in a desolate environment. Even in the worst of circumstances, it serves as a reminder that there is hope.



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