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Joe Orso: Lama Ole: Buddhist teacher or charlatan?

By Joe Orso For the Tribune | Posted: Sunday, November 15, 2009 12:05 am

Last week, a man some call a major driving force in Western Buddhism spoke at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

His lecture to more than 400 people at Graff Main Hall Auditorium raised a number of issues, which I'll get to shortly, but which really crystallize around a very basic question: What makes you a Buddhist teacher? Or better put, which teachers are being true to the teachings of the Buddha and which are deforming them?

You can ask the question about any religious person. For instance, despite his popularity, his ability to quote Scripture and his claiming of Jesus as his savior, did what the Rev. Jerry Falwell preached really have anything to do with Jesus?

I'd say not, others would say it did, and we'd find religious authority (different than divine authority) to be a very subjective thing.

So back to Lama Ole Nydahl, the curious figure who lectured for two hours Wednesday evening.

The 68-year-old man comes from Denmark, said his Diamond Way Buddhism has 600 centers around the world, and is better known in Europe than the United States. About 80 of his followers, many from Europe, were in La Crosse and are following him on his lecture tour in this country.

So is what he taught Buddhism?

In the past several years, I have found it a common experience that whenever Nydahl's Diamond Way Buddhism, which has a La Crosse center, comes up in conversation with other Buddhist practitioners, people question its validity. And some of these people have described Nydahl as a charlatan.

Unfortunately, his visit here supported this view — at least for me.

While some of what came out of his mouth fell within the framework of Buddhism — like words about suffering and emptiness — his ideas were more confusing than enlightening, and by the end of his lecture he was losing something like an audience member a minute.

To be fair, Nydahl was aware of his poor performance, which included pounding coffee, taking pills and leaving the stage for a bathroom break. He blamed it on jet lag, although he still found enough energy to join his students at a downtown bar afterwards.

But even if he was just having a bad night, there is a more deeply disturbing aspect to the Nydahl phenomenon.

When I asked him the next day about claims that he has sexual encounters with his students, he didn't deny this.

"There's no teacher-student relationship involved in that," he said by phone. "They're Diamond Way Buddhists, but they're not my students in that moment. They're equal partners."

While I know I might be accused of puritan values, I firmly believe that such student-teacher relationships are predatory, and no clever logic can change that.

And to add to his recklessness, Nydahl ended our conversation describing Islam as "criminal."

In our region there are some very kind people who are Diamond Way Buddhists, which made me hesitate writing this column.

And it should be said that Nydahl is connected to a lineage in Tibetan Buddhism.

As Matthew T. Kapstein, Numata visiting professor of Buddhist studies at The University of Chicago Divinity School, e-mailed me: "Ole has a genuine relation with the Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism, so he's not quite a charlatan. However, he has his own interpretation and style, which do not accord closely with traditional practice among the

Kagyu.“

But while I hesitated writing, since Buddhism is a minority religion here, I decided it would be valuable to clarify that at least some people question the authenticity of Nydahl's Diamond Way.

And for those seekers curious about Buddhism, many other avenues can lead you to a tradition much richer and more grounded than what you'll find in Nydahl.

At least, that's my opinion.