

Tibetan Buddhism - Unit One

Introduction: A world next to heaven

Tibetan religious practices are, to the Western mind, a bewildering combination of both the rational and the magical. From the Buddhist practices, based often on rational enquiry and debate, of the great monasteries of Tibet to the folk religion of the ordinary Tibetan peasant we encounter a plethora of distinct and diverse traditions. Moreover, the character of Tibetan religion has been shaped and moulded by the startling landscape of Tibet. The geographical region the size of Western Europe encircled and criss-crossed by mountains that is known to Tibetans as 'the Land of Snows' (*Bod*) is seen as both a frightening and magical environment.

Tibet is a vast plateau with a great diversity of climate and terrain that has given birth to a wide range of social and religious practices. One aspect of the Tibetan environment that has been commented upon on numerous occasions by both travellers and those interested in Tibet is its altitude and vastness. Man within such an environment was prey to the immense forces of nature that could at one moment be benevolent and the next destructive. Such forces were often personified, in early pre-Buddhist culture, as divine and demonic powers. Above all the landscape was dominated by the mountains and the sky under which mortal humanity struggled to exist. Such an environment both uplifted and crushed the human spirit simultaneously.



The Potala Palace, high in the mountains of Tibet

Within such an environment the Tibetan world view was more akin to that which could be discerned within the world of medieval Europe. In this world imagination was a dominant factor and thus the landscape of Tibet was transformed into a sacred landscape with pilgrimage becoming a major expression of the religious culture.

When Buddhism entered Tibet its ideas were sown upon fertile ground. The landscape of Tibet had shaped a certain sensibility to which Buddhist doctrines were conducive, particularly the doctrine of rebirth. Death rather than being perceived as the entry to eternity or an absolute destruction was considered to be but a link in a perpetual chain of becoming that only found cessation in awakening or 'enlightenment'. Such awakening was considered to be the responsibility of each individual and was to be accomplished by scrupulous attention to one's moral behaviour (Skt: *karma*, Tib: *las*).

When we begin to examine the nature of Tibetan religious practice we become aware that even the dominant religious force of Buddhism is inter-fused with indigenous and pre-Buddhist beliefs. It is this potent mixture of Buddhist and indigenous religion (spelt *Bon*, pronounced *P'oen*), rather than the complex doctrinal and philosophical dimensions of monastic Buddhism, which finds expression as 'folk religion' and which governs the daily life of the ordinary people. This folk religion has flourished beside the more doctrinally 'orthodox' forms of Buddhism practised in the great monasteries and institutions of Tibet.

The Buddhism of Tibet is a complex amalgam of Indian esoteric doctrines and practices that, together with indigenous elements, spawned a number of schools and sects in the course of Buddhism's diffusion in Tibet. In Tibet the adaptation of indigenous elements was made easier because of the apparent similarities between local religious traditions and the ethos of what was to be the primary expression of Buddhism in Tibet, namely, *Tantrism* (*rgyud*) - a form of practice whose origin is attributed to the Buddha. Many of the local deities (*jik ten pa*) of pre-Buddhist origin were co-opted and made protectors of the Buddhist path and teaching.

Tantric Buddhism or the path of the *Vajrayāna* is that which distinguishes Tibetan Buddhism from the forms of Buddhism found in countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Japan and China. Whilst 'Tantra', with the exception of one form of Japanese Buddhism, is that which differentiates Tibetan Buddhist practice from expressions of Buddhism in other cultures it is not itself of wholly Tibetan origin. Tantra is a development of late Indian form of Mahayana Buddhism that appears to have originated in Bengal and the Swat Valley (in contemporary Northern Pakistan). When Buddhism, because of Islamic incursions into Northern India, began to wane and eventually die in the country of its origin it was Tibet that was left as virtually the sole repository of the wisdom of late Indian Tantric Buddhism.

This wisdom is preserved in a voluminous literature that includes material from both the *Sūtra* (the words of the Buddha) and *Tantra* traditions of Buddhism together with vast numbers of commentaries penned by Indian masters. Altogether the Tibetan Buddhist Canon amounts to three hundred and seventeen volumes, preserved in two collections known as the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur*, containing 4567 individual works attributed to the Buddha and Indian Pandits (Masters). This vast legacy of material translated from Sanskrit and preserved in the Tibetan language is not, however, all that there is to the Tibetan literary heritage. There exists an equally vast quantity of material produced by Tibetan teachers and masters (*Lamas*) to be found within the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism and the production of textual commentaries continues into the contemporary era.

This unit is intended to be an introductory guide to the complex phenomena of Tibetan religion. Obviously central to this examination is the phenomenon of Tibetan Buddhism which permeates every facet of Tibetan culture. This fusion is so complete that it is almost impossible to differentiate between Tibetan culture and the Buddhism that informs almost all aspects of life both within Tibet itself and the Tibetan Diaspora that has resulted from the Chinese invasion of 1959.

Despite its great antiquity the message of Tibetan culture, with its emphasis on the development of wisdom and compassion, continues to speak to us. Whilst this message is often conveyed in the mythological and poetic idiom of Tibetan culture, the psychological insights conveyed within this tradition have a continued relevance for today's humanity in its attempt to navigate itself around a culturally different environment. This unit seeks to be a guide to this complex yet still relevant religious tradition.

A landscape of the spirit

Legends and myths surrounding the creation of Tibet abound in the Tibetan tradition and are nearly all traceable to the indigenous pre-Buddhist religion of *Bon* and folk culture. The mythologies that were shaped in pre-Buddhist Tibet have a readily identifiable structure, namely, the bringing of order out of chaos. Such myths represent for Tibetans a form of history. In these creation myths order is usually represented as good whilst chaos is identified as being evil. Thus we are given parallel creation myths charting the creation of evil as well as good. With the creation myths we also get the generation of a sacred geography wherein the land, mountains and lakes of Tibet are themselves of religious significance. In the West of the country close to the Nepalese border, for example, we have both lake Manasarowar and the mountain known as Kailash that is sacred for different reasons to both Indians and Tibetans.



The sacred mountain known as Kailash

Mountains in general have a sacred significance for Tibetans as they are the point of contact between heaven and earth. Here according to the ancient traditions were linked the gods of heaven and the gods of the earth. It is also where, according to another legend, the ancestors were said to descend from heaven. This connection between heaven and earth is affirmed in numerous Tibetan legends and writings almost as an article of faith. According to yet another myth it was the King Gri gum who was said to have inadvertently severed the connection between heaven and earth thus ensuring that the two worlds remained forever separated.

The Tibetan legends testify to an inseparable sacred connection between the land of Tibet and its peoples that pre-dates the arrival of Buddhism. Of course many of these attitudes and ideas would later find themselves placed in a Buddhist context and given significance within a Buddhist doctrinal framework. Pre-Buddhist gods of mountains and rocks (*dre, trin, tsen*) were thus described as 'worldly gods' (*jik ten pa*) who allowed themselves to be converted to 'Protectors' or 'Defenders' of the *Dharma* (the Buddhist teaching and path) by Padmasambhava the legendary bringer of Buddhism to Tibet in the seventh century. The gods and goddesses were said to possess magical powers and were capable of working miracles. Nevertheless the lay Tibetan practitioner had to remain wary of these gods as they were not always benign. Once the ire of such gods was invoked then their violent nature often succeeded in gaining the upper hand.

The day-to-day existence of the ordinary lay Tibetan is embedded within a network of religious significance intimately connected to the land which they inhabit. Thus the world rather than being obvious or simply given teems with signs and meanings that present themselves continually and are subject to interpretation. These various unseen forces of existence are therefore seen as inducing catastrophe or assisting with the difficulties of life. Whilst discouraging over reliance on these worldly forces there is no actual prohibition on the lay practitioner in propitiating the gods in what amounts to a fusion of pre-Buddhist and Buddhist beliefs.

Radiance and the Egg of Woes: Creation myths

The 'folk religion' (*mi cho*), which is closer to the indigenous Bon religion, of Tibet flourished alongside the teachings and practice of Buddhism as preserved by the monastic communities of the different schools. Within the folk religion there has been preserved a number of different creation myths of extremely ancient origin and possibly having some connection with earlier Indian and Iranian beliefs.

One mythology, for example, speaks of a primary god (*Yang dak gyal po*) of the universe who existed before the sun, moon, seasons and time, came into being. This was a god of pure potentiality. Then out of this pure potentiality is born a white and a black light which accordingly give birth to two beings: out of the white light a white man emerges and out of the black a black man. The black man is said to represent pure negation and is termed 'black misery' (*Myal wa nak po*). From the 'black misery' emerges the constellations, demons, drought, disease and all kinds of misery. It is at this stage that the demonic forces are said to begin their sinister work in the world.

In contradistinction the white man is seen as a god of goodness. He is termed 'the Radiant' (*O' zer den*) and is seen as the principle behind all that is good in the world. Contemporary scholarship clearly shows a linkage to some early forms of Iranian belief known as Zurvanism, an antecedent of Manicheism.

In yet other mythologies the figure of a creator appears who from pure potentiality manifests the universe. One such myth recounts how out of the breath of the creator there emerged two syllables *hu hu* and from this eventually the entire manifest universe. The contents of the manifest world were created by two fathers one who is beneficent and good (*phen yap*) and the other (*nod yap*) who is said to be responsible for all of the evil in the world. The beneficent father is said to arise from a white egg and the evil one from a black egg; the former is described as the 'Lord of Being' (*yoe pa*) and the latter as the 'Lord of Non-Being' (*med pa*) and is the origin of all the demonic powers.

The god who emerges from the black egg is said to have a good mother who is born of the waters and is therefore known as 'the Lady of the Waters' (*Chu cham gyal mo*). From the union of the beneficent god (*Shang po*) are born eighteen brothers and sisters, nine male and nine female who are the progenitors of all the divine beings.

The malevolent god is said to create evils such as demons, plague, famine, illness, violence and suffering in general. To him is credited all the forces that are opposed to being. What we see in colourful mythologies such as these is the creation of universe in which the forces of good and evil co-exist.

We have, finally, one more creation legend that is worth recounting. According to an unlikely Tibetan belief there is a legend that Tibet at one time lay beneath the sea and eventually emerged to become the highest country in the world. Intriguingly this is something that has been confirmed by science. The vast Tibetan plateau it appears was created, as were the Himalayas which border Tibet to the south, by the 'collision' of the Indian sub-continent - then an island- with the massive land mass which lay to its north. This 'collision' led to a folding of the earth's crust that resulted in a forcing up of the land, substantial parts of which may have originally lain beneath the sea. Recent investigations have shown that the Tibetan plateau continues to rise at the rate of about 0.4 to 0.8 inches a year. Additionally remains of amphibious dinosaurs (*ichthyosaurs*) have also been discovered on the southern edge of the Tibetan plateau adding confirmation to a legend which appears to be substantially true despite being wrapped in the shroud of myth and legend.

As will be seen the folk religion of Tibet is rich and diverse phenomena which includes substantial elements of pre-Buddhist culture together with material derived from Buddhism. However, the Buddhism of the lay person, as opposed to that of the monk or nun, is a much freer in not being bound by the tight rules of the monastic community. The religious lifestyle of the lay Tibetan will therefore encompass many practices and beliefs derived from pre-Buddhist folk culture and early Bon religion.

Ordinary lay Tibetans will be familiar from childhood with a wealth of stories derived from this folk tradition that recount epic deeds and magical happenings, some of which have become incorporated into well known Tibetan songs. Such Tibetans would feel themselves as inhabiting a world governed by divine and demonic forces. Life viewed in this way is thus a continuous struggle to defend oneself against the malign forces that threaten to overwhelm one's existence. Thus one's very home has to be defended by elaborate rituals from the harmful forces that abound in the world. As well as defending oneself against these harmful forces beneficent forces have to be evoked which will bring wealth and prosperity to the family.

Traditionally in Tibet divine presences or deities would be incorporated into the very construction of the house making it in effect a castle (*dzong ka*) against the malevolent forces outside of it. The average Tibetan house would have a number of houses or seats (*poe khang*) for the male god (*pho lha*) that protects the house. Everyday the man of the house would invoke this god and burn juniper wood and leaves to placate him. In addition the woman of the house would also have a protecting deity (*phuk lha*) whose seat could be found within the kitchen usually at the top of the pole that supported the roof.

The enormous pantheon of pre-Buddhist divinities would eventually be incorporated into the Buddhist Tantric pantheon. Such divinities, as mentioned above, whom the ordinary Tibetan was loath to renounce were assigned new functions as protectors of the Buddhist path and teaching. As such they were there to perform a retributive function in punishing those who transgressed the Buddhist precepts. Many of these divinities were associated with the land, mountains and lakes of Tibet and were known as *sa dak*. Some divinities had the specific task of protecting the land of Tibet and these deities are still invoked even today.

Thus the daily life of the average Tibetan was suffused with a sense of the sacred with which he was surrounded continuously. The folk religion of Tibet with its emphasis on the powers of nature should not, however, be seen simply as a fusion of *Bon* and Buddhism. Tibetan folk religious traditions are extremely ancient and showed considerable regional variation within Tibet itself. Buddhism rather than trying to eliminate either Bon or folk beliefs tried to absorb them. Where this absorption was unsuccessful it is possible to observe all these strands of Tibetan belief - folk, Buddhist and *Bon* - within religious practices.

The Religion of the Bon po

The *Bon* religion is the indigenous religion of Tibet which can probably be considered as a form of shamanism. It was the *Bon* religion that was the official state religion prior to the advent of Buddhism in Tibet. As a religion it was primarily concerned with negotiating the relationship between the human and the divine realms. Its priests called *shen* were there to ensure the fortunes of the state. This was carried out by means of complex rites and rituals



A class of Bon po nuns

With the advent of Buddhism in Tibet, *Bon* was not suppressed nor did it disappear but developed an even closer relationship with the folk religion of the ordinary Tibetan. The ordinary Tibetan was in general unwilling to renounce traditional beliefs and practices for the complex doctrines of Buddhism. An expression of this was to be found in the clinging to rites and rituals that bound ordinary Tibetans to the powerful supernatural forces that were believed to abound in nature. Manifestations of *Bon* belief and practice can be observed to this day in the lives of ordinary Tibetans.

Over the centuries ideas and practices derived from *Bon* found their way into the Buddhism practised in Tibet with the progressive incorporation of many *Bon* divinities into the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. These divinities were now ascribed the task of protecting the *Dharma* and became known as *Dharmapālas* - 'Protectors of the Dharma'.

Questions to Ponder

What kind of religion is the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet?

In what ways are pre-Buddhist beliefs incorporated into Tibetan Buddhism?

Reading

Geoffrey Samuels, *Civilised Shamans*, Chapter 10, *The Folk Religion and the Pragmatic Orientation*, Smithsonian Institute Press, 1993.