



CHAPTER SIX

BUDDHISM: A WAY OF LIFE

Know all things to be like this:

A mirage, a cloud castle,

A dream, an apparition,

Without essence, but with qualities that can be seen.

Know all things to be like this:

As the moon in a bright sky

In some clear lake reflected,

Though to that lake the moon has never moved.

Know all things to be like this:

As an echo that derives

From music, sounds, and weeping,

Yet in that echo is no melody.

Know all things to be like this:

As a magician makes illusions

Of horses, oxen, carts, and other things,

Nothing is as it appears.

Samadhirajasutra

Everything in Ladakh reflects its religious heritage. The landscape is dotted with walls of carved prayer stones and *chortens*, fluttering flags whisper prayers to the winds, and always on some distant height rise the massive white walls of a monastery. Buddhism has been the traditional religion of the majority of Ladakhis since approximately 200

B.C., when it was introduced from India. Today, all sects of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism are represented, under the overall spiritual leadership of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The villages where I have lived are Buddhist, but in the capital almost half the population is Muslim. In addition, there is a small group of Christians numbering a few hundred. Relations among these three groups have changed in recent years, but when I arrived they all showed profound mutual respect and an easygoing tolerance, strengthened by quite frequent intermarriages. On the main festival days of the respective religions, people of all groups would visit one another, exchanging *kataks*, the ceremonial white scarves. In my first few months in Ladakh, I was invited to join in the festivities at the time of *Id*, a Muslim holiday. I will never forget the sense of warmth and good humor as Buddhists and Muslims sat down together.

One of the central elements of Buddhism is the philosophy of *sunyata*, or "emptiness." I had difficulty understanding the meaning of this concept at first, but over the years, in talking to Tashi Rabgyas, it became clearer: "It is something that is not easy to talk about, and impossible to understand through words alone," he told me once. "It is something you can only fully grasp through a combination of reflection and personal experience. But I'll try to explain it in a simple way. Take any object, like a tree. When you think of a tree, you tend to think of it as a distinct, clearly defined object, and on a certain level it is. But on a more important level, the tree has no independent existence; rather, it dissolves into a web of relationships. The rain that falls on its leaves, the wind that causes it to sway, the soil that supports it—all form a part of the tree. Ultimately, if you think about it, everything in the universe helps make the tree what it is. It cannot be isolated; its nature changes from moment to moment—it is never the same. This is what we mean when we say that things are 'empty,' that they have no independent existence."

The use of the terms *emptiness* or *nothingness* to define *sunyata* has led many Westerners to think of Buddhism as nihilistic. It is often assumed that its followers are an apathetic lot who do not care if they live or die. Ironically enough, Tashi once expressed similar senti-

ments in reference to Christianity. "Everything is all laid out for you," he said. "Everything has been determined by God and is controlled by Him. It must make people very apathetic. There seems to be no room in Christianity for personal growth in the way that there is in Buddhism. Through spiritual practice we have an opportunity to develop ourselves."

Buddhism does not say that nothing exists, nor does it in any way encourage pessimism. On the contrary, it teaches that once we have understood the nature of the universe, we will realize a lasting happiness that is unaffected by the transient flow of outer events. Our ignorance—our experience of the world through the senses and through conceptualization—prevents us from seeing beyond the ordinary "everyday" world of appearance, where things exist as separate and permanent things. As long as we persist in seeing things in this "ignorant" way, we are in *samsara*, trapped on the wheel of existence.

We are not being asked to deny the "existence" of the world, but to alter our perception of it. Things do exist insofar as we perceive them with our senses. We do have bodies, we do need air to breathe. It is a question of emphasis. We are not being told to abandon the world as perceived by our senses, but rather to see it in a different light. The Buddha taught that beyond this world created by our own senses and limitations, the phenomenal world dissolves into a dynamic process. The true nature of reality lies beyond the realm of language and linear analysis.

Tashi would often quote from the renowned scholar Nagarjuna: "Those who believe in existence are stupid like cattle, but those who believe in nonexistence are still more stupid. [Things are] not existent, not nonexistent, not both and not something that is not both."

It is said that the universe is like an endless river. Its totality, the unity, does not change, yet at the same time it is in constant motion. The river as a whole exists, but you cannot say what it consists of; you cannot stop the flow and examine it. Everything is in movement and inextricably intertwined.

Tashi again: "Everything is subject to the law of dependent origination. As Nagarjuna said, 'Origin through relations is the Buddha's

rich profound treasure.' On this level our categories, distinctions, and labels—'you' and 'I,' 'mind' and 'matter'—become one and disappear. What we take to be solid and substantial is in fact changing from moment to moment. Just in the same way that the tree is 'empty,' the 'self' is empty. If you reflect on it, you too dissolve as part of everything else around you. The 'self,' or ego, is ultimately no more separate than anything else in the universe."

The delusion that the self exists independently is perhaps the greatest obstacle on the path to enlightenment. The belief in absolute, permanent existence leads to a cycle of endless craving, and the craving brings suffering. In our attachment to the notion of a separate self and separate things, we end up constantly striving and reaching for something new. Yet as soon as we have attained what we are seeking, the luster is gone and we set our sights elsewhere. Satisfaction is rare and brief; we are forever frustrated.

*There is no other way to please the Buddha
Than to please all sentient beings.*

Tashi would often remind me that knowledge and understanding were not sufficient in themselves. In fact they could be dangerous, he would say, if not accompanied by compassion. "The Dalai Lama has said that his true religion is kindness. Look at our prayers, they always emphasize concern for others":

*By the force of the noble, virtuous works done in this way,
My parents who have brought me up kindly,
The teachers from whom I got my Bodhicitta initiation,
All the diamond brothers, with cordial relationship,
All those persons with whom I have material and property relationship,
May they attain the state of Buddhahood very soon.*

In Buddhist teachings, compassion constitutes the so-called method of enlightenment. The poet-sage Milarepa said: "The notion of emptiness engenders compassion." When the boundaries of indi-

vidual existence have been worn away, you and I, instead of being absolutely separate beings, are aspects of the same unity.

Religion permeates all aspects of life in Ladakh, inseparable from art and music, culture and agriculture. People are deeply religious. Yet, from a Western point of view, they appear strangely casual about it. This apparent paradox struck me particularly strongly in 1976 when His Holiness the Dalai Lama came for a visit—the first one in many years. For months before, the sense of anticipation grew. People painted their houses, printed prayer flags, and stitched new clothes; they even dismantled their elaborate headdresses, washing the turquoises and corals and refurbishing the felt backing with bright red cloth. It was to be the Great Wheel, or Kalachakra, Initiation, performed on the banks of the Indus outside Leh. Long before the event, villagers from all over Ladakh started streaming in, some coming by bus or truck, thousands more walking or riding for days to reach the capital.

By the middle of the week-long teaching, the numbers had swelled to forty thousand. The air was charged with intense devotion, and yet amazingly at the same time there was almost a carnival atmosphere. One minute the man in front of me was lost in reverence, his gaze locked on the Dalai Lama; the next minute he would be laughing at a neighbor's joke; and a while later he seemed to be somewhere else, spinning his prayer wheel almost absentmindedly. During this religious teaching—for many of those present, the most important event of their lifetime—people came and went, laughing and gossiping. There were picnics and everywhere children—playing, running, calling out to each other.

Attending the ceremonies was a young Frenchman who had studied Buddhism in Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama's residence in exile. He took his new religion very seriously and was shocked by the Ladakhis. "These people are not serious. I thought they were supposed to be Buddhists," he said scornfully. Even though I knew there was something wrong about his reaction, I was not sure how to respond. I too had grown up in a culture in which religion was separated from



A festival at Phyang Monastery. The large thangka is unrolled only once a year.

the rest of life. It was something a small minority did on Sunday mornings, solemnly and seriously, but that was all.

From daily prayers to annual festivals, the entire calendar is shaped by religious beliefs and practices. The day of the full moon, which always falls on the fifteenth of the Tibetan lunar month, is when the Buddha was conceived, attained enlightenment, and died. Every other week of the month also has its religious significance. The tenth day, for instance, marks the birthday of Guru Rinpoche, who brought Buddhism to Tibet from India. On this day villagers gather in one another's houses to eat and drink while reading religious texts. For *nyeness*, in the first month of the Tibetan calendar, people assemble to fast and meditate together in the *gonpa*, or monastery. On holy days, the family often prints new prayer flags. Cloth in the five holy colors—red, blue, green, yellow, and white—is pressed onto inked carved wooden blocks. The new flags are placed on top of the old, which are never removed, but left to slowly disintegrate, spreading their message on the winds.

Every house is filled with reminders of the region's Buddhist heritage. The kitchen stove is decorated with a *spallbi*, an elaborate knot with no beginning and no end—the knot of prosperity. It is one of the eight lucky symbols of Tibetan Buddhism, which are often depicted in frescoes in the guest room. In addition to the prayer flags strung from corner to corner on every rooftop, there is often a large flagpole in front of the house. This *tarchen* signifies that the house chapel contains all sixteen volumes of the basic Mahayana texts, the *Prajnaparamita*, or books of "perfect wisdom." On one of the exterior walls, you may also see a little balcony with three *chortens* (*rigs-sum-gompo*)—one orange, one blue, and one white—symbolizing wisdom, strength, and compassion.

Other symbols from earlier times have also been incorporated into present-day Buddhism. On the roof is a *lhato*, a little chimney of mud topped with a bunch of willow branches and a wooden arrow. This is for the protective deity of the house. It contains a vessel filled with grains, water, and precious metals that are changed every New Year to assure continued prosperity. One of the outside walls may have a *sazgo namgo* (literally, "earth door, sky door"). The skull of a sheep or

dog is attached to a diamond-shaped web of wood and wool inset with the names and pictures of the owner and his wife. An inscription on it reads, "May these doors—of the earth and of the sky—be protected from evil spirits." Sometimes the house will be decorated with red markings—little figures, rows of dots, and swastikas—to please the *tsan*, a spirit that rides a white horse. From the front, this spirit looks beautiful; but his back, which he exposes if angered, is hideously raw, and to see it can cause grave misfortune.

The Ladakhis have a relaxed attitude to their spirits. Ceremonies are performed to appease them, but people certainly do not live in fear of them. In fact, they do not seem absolutely sure of their existence. "Do you think the spirits are real?" I once asked Sonam. "Well, they say they exist," he answered slowly. "I've never seen any, but who knows."

The role of the monasteries in Tibetan culture has often led people to describe the society as feudal. Initially, I too assumed that the relationship between the monasteries and the rest of the population was an exploitative one. Some monasteries own a lot of land, which is worked by the village as a whole. There are also farmers who, in addition to their own land, cultivate monastery fields in return for some of the yield.

On a broader societal level, however, the monasteries offer real economic benefit. In fact they provide "social security" for the entire community, ensuring that no one goes hungry. If an individual family should find itself with too many mouths to feed, any number of sons—usually the younger ones—become monks. In the monastery they are provided for by the community in exchange for religious services. The process of give and take between the monastery and village sustains a rich cultural and religious tradition in which all members of society are involved and benefits accrue to everyone. Moreover, anyone, male or female, young or old, can opt for celibacy and spiritual devotion as an alternative to the life of a married householder.

As a monk, Angchuk's younger brother Rinchen is respected, though he does not hold the same position as some of the more learned monks or reincarnate lamas, who are venerated for their spe-



Phuktal Monastery, in Zaskar. In addition to their spiritual role, monasteries help to provide economic security.

cial powers and knowledge. Rinchen has a great deal of freedom, despite certain well-defined duties. Though he has his own rooms at the monastery, he spends much of his time performing religious ceremonies in individual houses, not only in Tongde itself, but in the neighboring villages of Shadi and Kumik. Throughout the year, especially at the time of sowing and harvest, important rituals are performed in the chapel of every house. These keep him very busy and are also his main means of support. Each family pays him for his services, increasingly these days in cash. He still has his room at home, where he sleeps from time to time. When he is there, he does his share of household chores; his special skill is sewing.

On a number of occasions throughout the year, the monasteries are home to important ceremonies and festivals involving several days, even weeks, of ritual and prayer. During Yarnas, which takes place in summer, the monks stay indoors for up to a month, to avoid unwillingly treading on and killing insects. One of the biggest events of the year is the Cham dance, during which the basic teachings of Vajrayana Buddhism are enacted in theatrical form and an effigy of

the enemy of all people—the ego—is ceremoniously killed. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of villagers from all around come to watch the monks dancing in splendidly colorful masks, representing various figures of the Tibetan pantheon, all of which have a deeper symbolic meaning. The sounds of horns and drums blend with the chanting of mantras and laughter.

“As long as there is ignorance, there is a need for ritual,” the head lama of Stakna Monastery once told me. “It is a ladder that may be discarded once we have attained a certain level of spiritual development.” The rich fabric of ceremony and ritual in Ladakh, though an important part of religious practice, is not as central to the Buddhist teachings as it might appear. For me, the most profound expression of Buddhism in Ladakh lies in the more subtle values and attitudes of the people, from the simplest farmer to the most educated monk.

The Ladakhi attitude to life—and death—seems to be based on an intuitive understanding of impermanence and a consequent lack of attachment. Again and again I have been struck by this attitude in my Ladakhi friends. Rather than clinging to an idea of how things should be, they seem blessed with the ability to actively welcome things as they are. For instance, during the middle of the harvest it can snow or rain, ruining the barley and wheat that have been cultivated with such care for many months. And yet people remain completely unperturbed, often joking about their predicament.

Even death is more readily accepted. In my second year in Ladakh, a good friend of mine lost her two-month-old baby. I thought she would be distraught, and when I first saw her, she was clearly upset. But there was a difference. Although, as she told me, she was extremely saddened, her belief in reincarnation meant that death did not have the same sense of finality as it does for us.

The Ladakhi conception of reality is circular, one of a constant returning. There is not the sense that this life is the only opportunity. Death is as much a beginning as an end, a passing from one birth to the next, not a final dissolution.

Ladakhi attitudes seem to be influenced by meditation. Although deep meditation is rarely practiced outside the monastic community,

people spend significant periods of time in what you might call a semi-meditative state. Older people in particular recite mantras as they walk and as they work. Often a conversation will be punctuated with snatches of prayer: a few words and then, in the same breath, the hallowed refrain "*Om mani padme hum, om mani padme hum.*" Recent research in the West suggests that during meditation, the mode of consciousness that perceives in wholes or patterns is dominant. This would play a role in shaping the Ladakhis' holistic or contextual world view—a world view that is characteristic even of those who have little knowledge of Buddhist teachings.

It could be argued that even the Ladakhi language exhibits traces of Buddhism. Compared with any Western language that I know, Ladakhi seems to put a greater emphasis on relativity. The language obliges one to express more of the context of what one is trying to say. Most strikingly, the verb *to be* has more than twenty variations, depending on the specifics of the situation—in particular, on the relative intimacy of both the speaker and the listener with the subject matter. Unlike Westerners, Ladakhis never express themselves with certitude about something they have not experienced. Any event in which they have not personally participated will be described using verbs that reflect the limitations of their knowledge: "It is said that . . .," "It appears that . . .," "It is probable that . . ." If I ask someone, "Is it a big house?" he or she will be likely to answer, "It seemed big to me."

Even when people have personal experience, they are far more reluctant than we are to categorize and judge. Good and bad, fast and slow, here and there; these are not sharply different qualities. In the same way, Ladakhis will not think in terms of a fundamental opposition, for instance, between mind and body or reason and intuition. Ladakhis experience the world through what they call their *semba*, best translated as a cross between "heart" and "mind." This reflects the Buddhist insistence that Wisdom and Compassion are inseparable.



CHAPTER SEVEN

JOIE DE VIVRE

You mean, everyone isn't as happy as we are?

Tsering Dolma

At the end of one summer, I went with Ngawang Paljor, a sixty-year-old *thanka* painter, to Srinagar in Kashmir. He was traditionally dressed in woolen *goncha*, hat, and yak-hair boots, and in the Kashmiris' eyes he was obviously from the "backward" region of Ladakh. Wherever we went, people made fun of him; he was constantly teased and taunted. Every taxi driver, shopkeeper, and passerby in some way managed to poke fun at him. "Look at that stupid hat!" "Look at those silly boots!" "You know, those primitive people never wash!" It seemed incomprehensible to me, but Ngawang remained completely unaffected by it all. He was enjoying the visit and never lost the twinkle in his eye. Though he was perfectly aware of what was going on, it just didn't seem to matter to him. He was smiling and polite, and when people jeeringly shouted the traditional Ladakhi greeting, "*Jule, jule!*" he simply answered "*Jule, jule!*" back. "Why don't you get angry?" I asked. "*Chi choen?*" ("What's the point?") was his reply.

Ngawang's equanimity was not unusual. The Ladakhis possess an irrepressible joie de vivre. Their sense of joy seems so firmly anchored within them that circumstances cannot shake it loose. You