

of his or her daily offering of juniper incense to the local divinities as non-Buddhist in origin than are many practicing Christians to think of Christmas as in essence a pagan winter festival.

Besides Buddhism and Bön, there are other religions that also number Tibetans among their adherents. The most important of these is no doubt Islam, which has small Tibetan followings in Amdo and in some western parts of the Tibetan plateau, chiefly Ladakh and Baltistan, the latter now part of Pakistan. Tibetan Muslims of Kashmiri, Inner Asian, or Chinese (Hui) descent are also counted among the inhabitants of Lhasa and other Tibetan towns. In general, the urban Tibetan Muslim populace was engaged in commerce and the trades, though some Muslims were employed in occupations considered polluting by most Buddhist Tibetans, especially animal slaughter and butchering. Although Tibetan Buddhist nomads, like peasants and townsfolk, generally viewed these as evil occupations, the pastoral lifestyle always required the nomads to slaughter, bleed, and otherwise injure their animals. The services of Muslim butchers, therefore, were generally in demand only in and around the few urban population centers.

Though seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Catholic missionary efforts in western and central Tibet had no appreciable legacy, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Christianity made some inroads among Tibetans in the peripheral regions of Kham, Amdo, and Ladakh. One even hears occasional reports of Tibetan villages in the far southeast adhering to a nativist religion derived from Christianity that worships the "lord of heaven" (*namdak*). In recent decades, Christian mission activity has been on the increase in some parts of the Tibetan world, although it is not yet possible to assess the impact of this renewed proselytism. At least one Jewish convert of Tibetan origin is known to the present author as well. Nevertheless, though recent demographic trends do suggest that Chinese Muslim settlers are rapidly emerging as a major constituent of the population of the Tibetan plateau, none of the monotheistic traditions can be considered representative of major facets of traditional Tibetan religious life. Accordingly we shall focus here upon the Bön and Buddhist traditions that have long defined the main currents of Tibetan religion.

Propitiation, Therapy, and the Life-cycle

The Tibetan religions lay great stress upon rituals and practices intended to regulate relations between humans and the omnipresent spirit-world.

Included here are some of the major rites of the Tibetan state, for instance the rituals surrounding the state oracles and protective deities, that have developed over the course of centuries as solemn rites of national significance. On a smaller scale, daily observances such as *sang*, in which the fragrant smoke of burnt juniper is offered to the gods and spirits of the local environment, are performed in virtually every Tibetan household. Rituals of these types are fully integrated with the Bön and Buddhist religions in Tibet, and are generally practiced in accordance with liturgies authorized by the dominant religious orders.

On the sparsely inhabited Tibetan plateau, human life must be negotiated in relation to a surprisingly dense population of non-human agencies, from great gods dominating whole mountain ranges to mischievous spirits infecting a single bush. Belief in such invisible agency is universal in traditional society, and learned scholars no less than unlettered villagers are concerned to establish an appropriately balanced relation with the world of "gods and demons" (*lhasin, lhandré*) teeming all around. The cults of the protective divinities are diverse, reflecting differences of region, sect, clan, and even household. Nevertheless, they do clearly belong to a common religious system, whose unifying features include ways of classifying the spirits, the agency and powers attributed to them, the ritual and divinatory means whereby humans interact with them, and the mythologies invoked to account for their origins, character, and obligations. In respect to the latter, we have seen above (Chapter 3) that the legendary accounts of Padmasambhava's role in the conversion of Tibet to Buddhism place particular emphasis upon his subjugation of the local divinities, converting them to serve as sworn protectors of the Buddha's way. Historical and anthropological research show later Tibetan Buddhist masters as regularly assuming Padmasambhava's role in this respect, ensuring that relations with the protectors are mediated, whenever possible, in accord with accepted Buddhist norms. In effect, this meant that sacrifice was replaced with various types of substitutional offerings. Among the protectors, besides the indigenous spirits, there is also a large class of divinities who were introduced at various times from the surrounding lands. These include the Indian Buddhist *dharmapalas*, but in addition deities such as Pehar, the Tibetan state oracle and protector of the Dalai Lamas, who is said to have been brought from Turkestan by victorious Tibetan armies in the ninth century.

High ecclesiastical dignitaries and great aristocrats, no less than lay village priests or simple peasants, may act as the performers, patrons, or beneficiaries of the rites and practices addressed to such beings, and any imputation that these belong exclusively to the vulgar strata of Tibetan

religious life is unwarranted. In a recent study of the philosophical education of the monastic elite, for instance, we find this description of a noted teacher's relationship with a monastic protector:

When Gen Lob-zang Gya-tso enters the Pu-kang regional house of Drepung Lo-se-ling, his first act is to prostrate himself to the Great Goddess, the protector of the house. She is there for him in time of crisis. When the house asks him to work as a grain collector, it is the Great Goddess who appears in his dream and persuades him to accept this particularly distasteful task.¹

Nevertheless, depending upon one's place – literal and figurative – in the Tibetan world, some such practices will be one's immediate concern but others not. Strictly local divinities, those who govern a given valley, for instance, may require primarily the attention of the inhabitants of the location in question, without exacting obligations from others. The class of gods called *yüllha*, "god of the country," thus generally dominate a particular territory, where they are often identified with the mountain from which the principal water sources of the region flow and therefore serve as regulators and guardians of the life of the region in question. If the area concerned is sufficiently large or important, its chief divinity may assume a prominent place in the overall pantheon. Such is the case of Nyenchen Tanglha, the god of the great mountain range sweeping across central Tibet. But others enjoy only local significance – so, for instance, Trashil Pelchen, protector of the Solu Valley of eastern Nepal, whose lofty residence is now generally called by its Nepali name, Numbur Himal, and whose rites, though observed by the monks of Solu, are ignored in similar ceremonial contexts in the adjacent district of Khumbu, not to speak of places further afield.

When particular rites require the transgression of specific religious vows, we may also find a practical limitation placed upon cultic participation on the part of the Buddhist clergy. Thus we read, in an account of the annual festival in Saji village in the Repkong district of Amdo,

A statue of Shachung [the local protective divinity] was borne throughout the village in a sedan chair veiled and decorated with cloth so that the deity would not be polluted by the gaze of the onlookers. The procession visited each and every house, where standard offerings of bread, yogurt, flowers, butter lamps, grain, fruit, liquor, money and ceremonial scarves (*katak*) were made. The homes had been ritually purified to receive Shachung and people wore their best clothes as a mark of respect. An old man told us that people feel the real presence of Shachung, and pay much attention to this event, asking Shachung to bless their lines, property and future happiness.²

But because Shachung's cult demands offerings of blood – formerly made through animal sacrifice but now exclusively through the self-inflicted wounds of male devotees – participation in the festival is prohibited to the monks of the region.

In relation to the great domain of the gods and demons, therefore, there is no single body of ritual which engages all Tibetans in common. A measure of consistency is to be found in broad general beliefs and principles, but not in specific content. The ritual maintenance of Tibetan relations with the spirit-world, in its unity of principle and diversity of actual practice, may recall in some respects the religious life of ancient Greece or Rome.

Besides the ongoing need to uphold appropriately balanced relations with the spirit-world through the observance of regular propitiatory rituals, a large class of practitioners and practices has as its prime concern the rectification of these relations when they have been disturbed and so result in disease among humans or animals, nightmares and psychological afflictions, or natural catastrophes of various kinds. A twelfth-century Bönpo work outlines the curative dimensions of religious-medical practice in this way:

In general, living beings are subject to many sorts of affliction due to spirits and the like. One enters the way of practice in order to remove these afflictions by means of divination and exorcism. And because beings are subject to many diseases of fever and chill, etc., one enters the way in order to alleviate those illnesses by medicine and treatment. When the effects of disease or afflicting spirits have appeared, first one investigates what harm has occurred and what sort of disease or afflicting spirit is present. You diagnose a disease by examining pulse and urine, while afflicting spirits are investigated by means of divination and omens. Without halting the application of medicine and treatment to the effects of disease, you seek to bring about the benefits of the medicine and treatment; and without halting the application of divination and exorcism to the effects of afflicting spirits, you seek to bring about benefits through various sorts of exorcism. This is the way of practical action. The view realized here resembles that of a scout on a mountain pass who spies out all enemies and dangers, and so brings about their avoidance or removal. Similarly, in this case you realize, with respect to disease, that it may be treated and cured, and with respect to afflicting spirits, that they may be impeded and deflected.³

While the formalized outline given in this text reflects the influence of scholastic modes of analyzing and organizing knowledge that became prominent after Buddhism was established, the therapeutic interests expressed here were no doubt present in Tibet long before. Human



Figure 26 A diviner (*mopa*) on a Lhasa sidewalk consults the astrological almanac for a client. Note the hand-drum, hanging above his stand, which he uses in the performance of rituals as needed, 1992.

interactions with the world of the spirits were thus to varying degrees analogized to, and regarded as complementing, medical practice. This same principle is illustrated in recent times by the organization of the Tibetan state-sponsored medical college as the Mentsi Khang, the Institute of Medicine and Astrological Calculation, the two arts thereby continuing to reinforce one another. In this context, however, divinatory methods, like medicine, are regarded as belonging to the domain of the sciences and not, strictly speaking, that of religion at all.

Divination (*mo*), whether astrological, augural, or mediumistic, played an essential role in all facets of Tibetan life and remains a chief preoccupation thereof. The counsel of diviners is sought in connection with almost every decision of any importance: marriages, funerals, business dealings, government affairs, construction work, voyages, agricultural activities, medical procedures, ritual practices, and more are routinely decided through divination. Even apparently trivial undertakings – a suitable date for a visit to the barber, for instance – normally require at least a glance at the astrological almanac (*loto*). What is more, divination is not just an ubiquitous aspect of Tibetan life, but is a prolific framework

for the systematization of knowledge; literally dozens of codified systems of divination are studied and practiced. These include numerical divination by means of dice or rosaries, the reading of omens in bird calls, knotted strings (*jutik*), reflections, and meteorological events, as well as, of course, horoscopy.

Besides diviners, there exists as well a broad class of practitioners who have often been assigned to the ill-defined category of “shaman.” Included here are a variety of spirit-mediums (*lhapa*), known also as “braves” (*pawo*) or, in some places, *bönpo* (and thus often confounded with the adherents of the institutional Bön religion). These are specialists in therapeutical techniques and exorcism, who enter into trance to channel spirits and divinities of various kinds and thus determine the measures required to address actual or possible disorders in the relations between their human clients and the ubiquitous gods and demons. Other types of practitioner occupying similar roles are also known, for instance, those who have “returned from the beyond” (*delok*), whose near-death experiences have resulted in a special gift for communication with the invisible realm. These varied forms of shamanistic practice found their highest exemplification in the great state oracles, including the divinity Pehar whose medium resided at Nechung Monastery not far from Lhasa. Important matters of government were frequently decided on the basis of cryptic, oracular pronouncements, delivered through the possessed medium. The actual transfer of political authority to the young Fourteenth Dalai Lama in 1950, for instance, was impelled by the insistence of both the Nechung and Gadong oracles.

An important category of ritual practice concerns the expulsion of evil forces of various types: disease, ghosts, and other harmful spirits, inclement weather (especially hail and frost), famine, war, and even gossip. The manner in which such rituals have been adapted for Buddhist use has been extremely uneven, varying both according to local tradition and sectarian difference. Throughout the country, however, monks or lay priests associated with village temples had to be proficient in at least some of these practices in order to minister to the common troubles, fears, and complaints of the populace. Because this grassroots priesthood frequently adhered, at least nominally, to the Nyingmapa order, or sometimes to Bön, a veneer of conformity with the normative teachings of these traditions was often given to exorcistic rituals intended for popular use. In their Nyingmapa versions, for instance, they are often presented as the instructions of Padmasambhava. An example is a ritual for the expulsion of gossip, anthropomorphized here as the “gossip-girl” (*mikha bumö*), whose effigy must be cast out of the

village or household that seeks to purify itself of the divisive evil that issues from loose tongues:

Girl with black, grimy, tangled hair,
When you first arrived, where did you come from?
You came from the borders of Tibet and China,
Where malicious gossip afflicted the Chinese,
So that the Chinese king sent you to Tibet.
Many Chinese demons then afflicted our tribes . . .

All the gods and men subject to Tibet
Were afflicted with the malicious gossip of all nations,
With the malicious gossip of corporeal men,
With the malicious gossip of incorporeal gods and demons,
With the malicious gossip of whatever exists,
With the malicious gossip of whatever doesn't exist.

Daughter of malicious gossip, listen here!
First you became nine demon sisters in China.
Second you became the nine demonesses.
At last you became the nine gossip sisters.
But whatever you become, now you are turned back!
You have no place at all to stay here.
Malicious gossip, don't stay! Malicious gossip, go away!⁴

In this case the exorcism of gossip addressed an important communal and psychological need. It attempted to promote mutual accord in small communities by attributing gossip and its pernicious effects to a demonic agent, the gossip-girl, who was not a member of the community at all, but rather an alien and unwanted presence within it. The frequent attribution of gossiping, smoking, and other negatively valued behavior to China reflects, too, the degree to which the Tibetans may have felt themselves threatened by the powerful neighbor that often sought to dominate Tibetan affairs. Though the female gendering of gossip here is certainly significant, there were plenty of male demons as well; evils were gendered, but by no means exclusively (or even predominantly) feminine.

Tibetan rituals of exorcism and propitiation often made use of colorful "thread-crosses" (*dö, namkha*) or of the carefully crafted offering-cakes called *torma*. Of special importance, too, were rites connected with the restoration of vital energies (*tse, sok*), and of the positive conditions promoting longevity (*tsering*), prosperity (*yang*), and good fortune (*lungta*). The removal of pollution (*drip*) and the absorption of blessings

(*jinlab*) were fundamental concerns pervading Tibetan religious life in all its aspects. The steady effort to establish and to maintain positive relations with the surrounding environment was symbolized throughout the Tibetan world by the planting of colorful flags, also called *lungta*, printed with prayers and benedictions to be carried to all quarters by the wind.

Tibetan life-cycle rituals, too, were generally performed in accordance with Buddhist norms. Thus infants were taken to lamas to be named, and the blessing of the bodhisattva of wisdom, Mañjushri, was invoked as an impetus to success in study. Though marriage was not a sacrament for Tibetan Buddhists, meritorious acts of donation and the like were often enjoined in connection with wedding ceremonies. These were sometimes directed by ritual specialists or monks, especially for marriages among nobles, in order to bring merit and blessings to the union. In one case, that of the wedding of a princess from the principality of Dergé in Kham, there is even a ritual program authored by the renowned master Jamgön Kongtrül (1813–1899).⁵ Such ceremonies, given literary form by the clergy, were, however, quite rare.

Within the life-cycle, death was always the preeminent concern of Buddhism and mortuary rites were in almost all cases performed in accordance with Buddhist ritual injunctions. Though one might seek to live to the fullest extent of one's span through special rituals designed to ward off untimely death (*chilu*) and to achieve longevity (*tse drup*), nevertheless, in the words of the epic of Gesar,

When it comes time to die,
A thousand buddhas can't turn things around.⁶

In recognition of this truth, the art of dying correctly was a matter of particular urgency for religious Tibetans. Typically this meant either learning to perform for oneself, or having a lama perform on one's behalf, the last rite of *powa*, the projection of the dying consciousness into a pure realm of rebirth. In this context particular devotion was accorded to the buddha Amitabha, whose heaven, the Land of Bliss (*dewachen*, Skt. Sukhavati), was the object of special prayer services:

From here in the western direction,
Is Amitabha's field.
May all those who adhere to his name
Be born in that supreme field!

Like the lotus unsoiled by the mire,
Unsoiled by the three worlds' taint,

Sprung from the lotus of being,
May we be born in the Blissful Land!⁷

Additional rites performed on behalf of the deceased included the recitation of the book of *Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate State*, or *bardo*, the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In all events, in times of mourning the merits of charity and religious offering were much encouraged, to benefit both the deceased and his or her survivors. In an episode from the epic, for instance, recounting the death of the hero Gesar's mother, thousands of stupas are consecrated on her behalf, fresh prayer flags are made to adorn the entire kingdom, and bountiful donations are distributed among the monks and the entire population, in accord with each one's rank and merit, all of this to ensure the propitious rebirth of the departed.⁸ Though the details are recounted with much hyperbole, the epic here strictly reflects current practice.

An appropriate date for the disposal of the corpse was determined astrologically. In central Tibet the remains were then generally brought to the "mandala" of the cemetery to be dissected and fed to the vultures, whose flight was considered analogous to spiritual flight to the heavens. The origins of this custom are unknown, though some have noted a parallel to Zoroastrian practice and so have suggested Iranian influence. Cremation was also prominent in some places, particularly in the wooded Himalayan regions. High-ranking clergy and reputed saints were often cremated, even in central Tibet, though they were sometimes mummified and entombed in shrines, as was the Fifth Dalai Lama, a practice that recalls the entombment of the early medieval Tibetan kings. Liturgical rites generally continued for a period of seven weeks following death, corresponding to the forty-nine days of the *bardo*. Annual memorial services for the dead were also sometimes held, particularly to commemorate departed religious teachers.

The explicit purpose of these elaborate and long-lasting funerary practices, at least when dedicated to persons who were not regarded as religious masters – for saints were not thought to require the intercession of ordinary mortals – was ostensibly to secure a favorable station of rebirth for the departed. However, as in the case of rites dedicated to worldly protectors, an equally clear function of these rituals was to prevent the spirits of the deceased from disturbing the living and to reassure the survivors on this score. This tacit purpose became explicit in connection with particularly inauspicious death – for example by murder or accident – in which case the spirit might loiter about haunting his former dwellings and making mischief. When this occurred, special rites

intended to exorcize the ghost and dispatch it to a suitable abode were required. The premature decease of children posed similar problems. Thus we are told of an eighth-century noble, the minister Ba, whose young son and daughter suddenly died:

When a monk asked whether the minister wished his children to return as gods or as human beings, Ba chose divine rebirths for them, but his wife wished them to return as her own children once more. To console both, the monk suggested that he lead the son to a godly realm, but that the daughter take birth in the family again. As he performed the ceremony, there was a miraculous transformation of the son's remains into *shariram*, relics, indicating his rebirth as a god. The monk then took a pearl, smeared it with a solution of vermilion, and placed it in the left cheek of the mouth of the daughter's corpse. After performing a ritual "as a mark of faith," the infant was placed in an urn and buried beneath her mother's bed. Ten months later, a child was born into the family with a pearl in its mouth spotted red; the urn was disinterred and found to be empty.⁹

The ritual described, associating the blood-red of vermilion with the rites of the dead, may be immediately reminiscent of the mortuary practices enacted on behalf of the kings (Chapter 2). In this case, however, the influence of Chinese alchemical rites designed to achieve immortality is also evident in the motif of the pearl placed in the corpse's mouth. This serves as a reminder that the vast domain of Tibetan therapeutic and exorcistic ritual was complex in its formation, the product of cultural interactions over the course of centuries, both within Tibet and between Tibet and its neighbors.

Buddhist Basics

The several orders and schools of Tibetan Buddhism and Bön are distinguished, one from the other, by many special doctrines, rituals, and spiritual practices. Nevertheless, the Tibetan religions also share a considerable, common body of instruction and tradition. As in most forms of Buddhism, the impermanence of conditioned reality and the resulting inevitability of suffering and death are matters of particular concern. This is reflected, as we have just seen, in a remarkable ritual emphasis on the passage of the dead. Living beings who have not achieved nirvana (Tib. *nyangdé*), the enlightenment of a Buddha (Tib. *sanggyé*), are subject to a perpetual round of rebirth (Skt. *samsara*, Tib. *khorwa*), their condition in any given lifetime, whether human, divine, or infernal,

being determined by the impetus of their past meritorious and demeritorious deeds (Skt. *karma*, Tib. *lé*). Tibetan Buddhism therefore stresses the necessity of gaining merit through donations (Skt. *dana*, Tib. *jinpa*) to monks and religious institutions, offering of lamps and incense, recitation of scriptures, performance of prostrations and circumambulations, ransoming of animals from the butcher (*tsetar*), and religiously valued actions of many other types. One must turn from worldly activities to religion by taking refuge in the Three Precious Jewels (Skt. *triratna*, Tib. *könchok-sum*): the Buddha, his teaching (Skt. *dharma*, Tib. *chö*), and the religious community (Skt. *sangha*, Tib. *gendiün*). Often one's lama, or guru, is added to this universal Buddhist trinity as a fourth refuge. These essential elements of Tibetan Buddhist belief were expressed succinctly by a famed nineteenth-century master:

When it comes time to die, even the power and might of a universal monarch is of no use. The riches of Vaishravana, the god of wealth, are of no more value than a sesame seed. Even if you have a great company of parents, friends, relations, and associates they cannot lead you elsewhere. As if you were merely a hair picked out of the butter, you enter the great abyss of the intermediate state (between death and rebirth, the *bardo*), not knowing your destination. Without refuge or protection you must go on alone. Such a time will certainly come. And when it does come, that is not all – the bewildering manifestations of the intermediate state are terrifying, beyond conception, inexpressible. When you come to experience them, nothing will be of benefit except the genuine doctrine and the precious guru who is your guide. None of the comforts or friendships of this life can help.

Moreover, owing to the force of past actions and psychological affliction we continuously revolve through the three realms of samsara, and in future lives will find only misery, without a moment of ease. Concerning that: If born in the hells, the torments of heat and cold are unbearable. If born among the hungry ghosts, one is afflicted by the pains of hunger and thirst. If born among the animals, one is brought to grief by the pains of being slaughtered, devoured, enslaved, and by that of stupidity. If born among human beings, one will mourn the anguish of birth, aging, illness, and death. If born among the demigods, there is still the suffering of violence and strife. And even if born among the gods, there will be the pain of death and the fall to a lower condition.¹⁰

Accordingly one ought to strive only for liberation, for freedom from the perpetual torments of ongoing rebirth. Tibetan Buddhists are encouraged not to seek nirvana for themselves alone, however, but to cultivate compassion (Skt. *karuna*, Tib. *nyingjé*) for all living beings. One is to

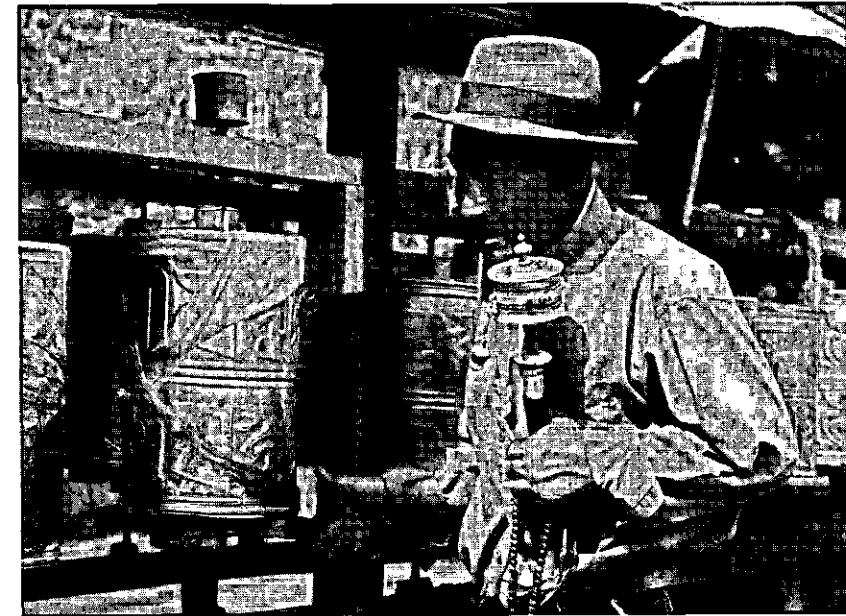


Figure 27 Turning prayer-wheels (*mani khorlo*) is an ubiquitous spiritual exercise. Associated with the recitation of the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, it is intended to focus the mind on compassion, to bring peace to all suffering beings, Lhasa, 2002.

embark upon the Great Vehicle (Skt. *mahayana*, Tib. *thekchen*) that is the path of a bodhisattva (*changchup sempa*), and to develop the virtues of charity, self-restraint, patience, diligence, meditation, and insight. This last is above all insight into the radically contingent nature of conditioned things, that is, their emptiness (Skt. *shunyata*, Tib. *tongnyi*). To comprehend this difficult concept through reason is among the central concerns of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and is a source of considerable debate. The ethical orientation of the Mahayana, considered to be the basis for religious life in Tibet, is summarized in the same sermon cited above:

Thinking of all living beings as the gracious parents of our past lives we should be compassionate to beggars and other unfortunates who come to our doors. We should love those who are unhappy. And we should think as follows: In order to remove the sufferings of living beings and to establish them in happiness I must become a Buddha. Therefore I will practice the genuine doctrine.

So, with love, compassion, and an enlightened attitude we should protect the lives of other living beings, give generously and without

attachment, adhere to our vows, speak truthfully, bring adversaries together, speak gently, praise others' virtues, be content, love others, and believe in the causal principle of karma – these are the ten virtues. Moreover, we should also practice prostrations, do circumambulations, erect images, books, and stupas, recite the scriptures, give worshipful offerings, recollect the words and meaning of the doctrine, expound them to others, critically examine those words and their meaning, become absorbed in the contemplation of that which is genuinely significant, and so forth. We should practice such positive karma ourselves, encourage others to do so, and rejoice when others have done so. Thus, even if we practice only minor virtues, then just as a pot is filled drop by drop, we will gradually attain Buddhahood.¹¹

In its general outlines the outlook of institutional Bön was similar. A text whose redaction is attributed by the Bönpo to the eighth-century culture hero Vairochana, but which probably dates to some time after the eleventh century, describes the way of the Compassionate Spiritual Warriors (*thuje sempa*), who are equivalent to the bodhisattvas of mainstream Buddhism:

Through the application of the great axioms
they perceive that outer and inner are not opposed.
Hence their minds are free from subject and object,
which they know to be the two aspects of a single experience.
They preserve the vows restraining body, speech, and mind.
Savoring the experience of clarity and awareness,
they meditatively cultivate just the cognition of that consciousness.
Practicing the path, they perfect themselves in gnosis and merit,
and act on behalf of both self and others through the force of compassion.
The result is to realize the level of unborn gnosis, universal light.
Here seven distinctions are obtained,
so that their realization, conduct, gnosis, effort, skillful means,
fruition, and enlightened activity become especially distinguished.¹²

Self-restraint and the cultivation of compassion and merit as the basis for the spiritual life were thus widely accepted as a Tibetan cultural norm. It was an orientation systematically reinforced by means of systems of spiritual exercise (*lojong*), which were the object of rigorous study and practice on the part of the clergy, but entered lay life as well, above all through popular instructions on the meditations of Avalokishvara and other divinities, together with advice for pilgrimage, the practice of circumambulation, the offering of lamps, and other fundamental expressions of Tibetan religious adherence.

Monastic Institutions and Education

The institutional heart of Tibetan Buddhism was the monastery. Monasticism was encouraged on a massive scale in traditional Tibetan society, particularly after the consolidation of political power by the Fifth Dalai Lama. This was justified by the belief that the monk was in an especially privileged position to avoid evil and to achieve merit, so that by maximizing the number of monks the maximum of merit accrued to Tibetan society as a whole, especially to those individuals and families who most contributed to the monastic system by dedicating sons to the religious life and wealth to support religious activities. Nomadic groups in the east often felt this to be a particularly urgent matter, for the merit earned by supporting good monks and their monasteries was believed to counterbalance to some extent the burden of sin that one acquired through actions prohibited by the system of religious ethics, especially the slaughter of animals, that were nevertheless unavoidable in a nomadic livelihood. Though worldly life was thought to be inevitably ensnared in various evils, a family could still better itself spiritually by committing some sons to the clergy. And if those sons achieved religious distinction, this could sometimes also impact favorably upon the status of the family concerned. This outlook helped to sustain the large or small monasteries and shrines of various kinds that were to be found in nearly every locale.

In practical terms the monastery fostered a concentration of cultural resources, serving as a center for education and the cultivation of the arts, though in most cases only a minority of the monks participated in these pursuits. Significantly, too, the monastery absorbed surplus labor. Whenever the rate of fertility outpaced the expansion of economic activity – and there is reason to believe that this was a regular tendency throughout much of the Tibetan world – monasticism provided a socially valued alternative to production. For religious girls and women nunneries also existed, though convents for nuns were less numerous and less populated than monasteries, and seldom had resources to provide more than a rudimentary education. However, it is also true that nuns more often than monks continued to live with their families, contributing to household work while also pursuing their devotions. The apparent numerical discrepancy between the male and female religious, therefore, may be due in part to the fact that relatively fewer religious women lived in specifically religious institutions. But it is also clear that nuns in most places suffered from economic privation, as patterns of donation generally favored the monks and because many monasteries, but seldom nunneries, controlled substantial estates.

the teaching all but disappeared in later times. Padampa continued to be revered as a culture hero, however, and the collection of verse aphorisms attributed to him – the *Century for the People of Dingri* – remains a popular classic of Tibetan gnomic literature. Severance, by contrast, permeated Tibetan Buddhism overall and is today preserved by all orders. Both of these systems of instruction seek to bring about realization as it is understood in the “Perfection of Wisdom” (Skt. *Prajñāparamita*) sutras by means inspired by esoteric Buddhist practice. This takes particularly dramatic form in the traditions of Severance, whose exquisite liturgies involve the adept’s symbolic offering of his or her own body as food for all beings throughout the universe.

The famous *Kalachakratantra*, or “Wheel of Time,” gave rise to a system of practice called the “Yoga of Indestructible Reality” (*dorjé neljor*), which was transmitted in Tibet initially during the early eleventh century. A great many lineages specializing in this tantra rapidly arose, so that it became one of the dominant esoteric traditions of the early second millennium. The Kalachakra proposes in effect a system of universal knowledge, including astronomical calculation, medical tradition, and, above all, mastery of the internal disciplines of yoga. Indeed, these three domains – that of the universe without, the body within, and the esoteric realm of yoga – are treated homologously here, mapped onto one and the same divine mandala. As will be seen in the following chapter, the Kalachakra would become the basis for the Tibetan calendrical system, among other branches of learning.

During the fourteenth century two approaches to the interpretation and practice of the Kalachakra became predominant. The first was that of Zhalu Monastery, which was given its decisive formulation in the writings of the celebrated scholar and editor of the canon Butön Rinchen-drup (1290–1364). The second major Kalachakra tradition emerged at the monastery of Jonang, where it was promulgated by the philosophically controversial master Dölpopa Sherab Gyeltsen (1292–1361). While these two contemporaries were both widely revered, they arrived at opposing conclusions regarding the Kalachakra’s teaching in relation to Buddhist philosophy. For Dölpopa, the tantra supported the much contested view that the definitive doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism was that of buddha-nature, not emptiness, so that the absolute could be considered not as empty in itself but only as extrinsically empty (*zhentong*) with respect to relative phenomena. In its own nature it was, rather, a plenitude of the qualities of the highest enlightenment. By contrast, Butön held that the discourse of buddha-nature was itself just a way of speaking of the emptiness that stood as the true heart of the doctrine. The latter

came to be favored in the Gelukpa order, and it is the “Butön tradition” (*buluk*) that continues to be transmitted in that order today, above all by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. The Jonangpa order, which was suppressed for political reasons by the government of the Fifth Dalai Lama during the seventeenth century, continued nevertheless to thrive in some parts of far eastern Tibet. Its controversial teaching of extrinsic emptiness would become an important element in the nineteenth century eclectic movement in Kham.

The last of the lineages of instruction that is often enumerated is the rare and so far unstudied “Service and Attainment of the Three Esoteric Realities” (*dorjé sumgyi nyendrub*), which specializes in the internal yoga of the subtle energy channels and vital energies. It is said to stem from the teaching of the goddess Vajrayogini, as received by the Tibetan adept Orgyenpa Rinchen-pel (1230–1309) during his extensive travels in northwestern India. The teaching was popularized for a time by Orgyenpa’s immediate successors, but subsequently it seems to have lapsed into obscurity.

The division of the Bönpo into a number of distinct lineages and traditions has also a long and complex history, blending ancient clan-based priestly lines and later monastic institutions. The most distinguished center of learning among the Bönpo was generally thought to be Menri Monastery in Tsang, founded in 1405 by Nyammé Sherab Gyeltsen (1356–1415). The latter had been a disciple of the great Sakyapa teacher Rongtön Sheja Künzi, who himself had been by origin a Bönpo. The curriculum formulated at Menri reflected in most aspects the Buddhist scholasticism of the period, but integrated with a general framework derived from older Bön traditions.

Festivals, Pilgrimages, and Ritual Cycles

Among the many characteristic religious activities in which virtually all Tibetans participate, pilgrimage is particularly prominent. Pilgrimage was traditionally one of the central phenomena contributing to, and perhaps even to some extent engendering, the cultural unity of Tibet. Pilgrimage, among other things, promoted commerce in both goods and information. It brought persons from distant parts of the Tibetan world into direct contact with one another and thus militated to some extent against divisive regional tendencies.

Most Tibetans regarded the religious shrines of Lhasa to be particularly important to visit. Here, in the ancient Tibetan capital, they could

behold and be blessed by contact with the Jowo Shakyamuni image residing in the central temple, which was thought to have been brought from China by the princess of Wencheng. The pilgrims who flocked to Lhasa brought offerings for the temples and monks, and also frequently engaged in small trade so as to finance their journeys. Thus, besides its purely religious significance, pilgrimage played an important role in the Tibetan economy.

The capital, however, was not the sole center of pilgrimage. In fact, there was a sort of national pilgrimage network in Tibet, whose routes, extending the length and breadth of the country, joined great and small temples and shrines, as well as caves, mountains, valleys, and lakes that were imbued with sacred significance. In far western Tibet the greatest pilgrimage center was undoubtedly Mt. Kailash, regarded popularly as being substantially identical with the world-mountain, the *axis mundi*. As such it was a major destination for both Hindus and Buddhists. The Tibetan pilgrims who sometimes walked for months, even years, to reach the "most precious glacial peak" (*Gang Rinpoché*), were often joined in the final stages of their journey by Indian holy men and devotees, who made the difficult trek from the Indian plains over the Himalayan passes. Other important centers of pilgrimage included Tsari, where a great procession, convened once in twelve years, was said to purge even the taint of murder, and Chöten Nyima, to the north of Sikkim, where incest pollution could be cleansed.

Mt. Kailash is thought to be the center of a sacred mandala, around which, throughout an area extending for many hundreds of miles, all significant geographical features are arrayed in a well-ordered and meaningful fashion. At these great pilgrimage centers religious significance is ascribed to all aspects of the environment. This is reflected in the guidebook to Crystal Peak, in northwestern Nepal near the Tibetan frontier:

At Crystal Peak the environment resembles the great world-system itself. On the upper slopes dwell the masters who are the roots of one's practice and also the past teachers of the lineage. On the middle slopes dwell the assembled meditational deities with whom one forms spiritual bonds. On the lower flanks the dakinis of the three spheres dwell like a mass of gathering clouds. The protectors of the teaching dwell all about.

In the words of Guru Padmasambhava, it is said, "Among the twenty-one great snow peaks there are hidden places, hidden treasures, and hidden lands. Especially at the great Crystal Peak, all who pray, who offer feasts, who make material offerings, who perform beneficial acts of body, speech and mind, will actually be guided by the mother goddesses and dakinis to Sukhavati – no doubt about it! Even if the worst among you pilgrims is



Figure 32 Pilgrims performing the *lingkhor*, or ritual circuit, of Ganden Monastery, 2002.

merely born in the mundane human world, that one will still avert all the harm of strife and violence, and the bad fortune of illness, war, and famine – there is no doubt!"²⁰

Related to the pilgrimage cycles are the festivals of Tibetan Buddhism, which serve to organize time much as the pilgrimage routes organize space. The Tibetan New Year requires the performance of extensive rites on behalf of the protective divinities, followed by the convening of the Great Prayer Festival (*mönlam chenmo*) in Lhasa. In the fourth lunar month the celebration of the Buddha's enlightenment (*saga dawa*, equivalent to the Vesakh of Theravada Buddhism) is marked by fasting and communal prayer. *Dzamling chisang*, the "general incense fumigation (*sang*) of the world," falls on the full-moon day of the fifth month, in the early summer, and is an occasion for ritual dance (*cham*) in the monasteries, elaborate *sang* rites in the mountains, and protracted picnicking. The cycle of celebrations inaugurated in the central Tibetan monasteries of Lhasa, Tramdruk, and Samyé by the ill-fated monarch Muné Tsenpo (Chapter 3) is observed at this time. The Yoghurt Festival (*zhotön*) of the seventh month marks the conclusion of the monks' summer retreat



Figure 33 The “lords of the cemetery” (*durtrö dakpo*) confront the comical characters called “teachers” (*atsara*) in a performance of *cham*, Minyak Lhagang, Sichuan, 1992.

and in and around Lhasa is accompanied by the display of gigantic appliqué *tankas* at Sera and Drepung Monasteries, together with public performances of the *Aché lhamo*, masked operas accompanied by elaborate dancing and song. The Buddha’s mission to teach his late mother in heaven and his subsequent return to the human world are commemorated by the Festival of the Descent from the Heavens (*lhabab düchen*), which falls on the twenty-second of the ninth lunar month. The tenth day of each lunar month is consecrated to the guru, and among the Nyingmapa in particular is a time for communal feast rituals, and sometimes also the performance of *cham*, while the twenty-fifth of the month is dedicated to the guru’s female counterpart, the *dakini*.

More detailed consideration of a single event will help to clarify the interweaving of time, geography, and religious knowledge in the spiritual life of Tibet. The festival known as the Drigung Powa Chenmo, “The Great Rite of *Powa* (the transfer of consciousness at death) taught at Drigung,” takes place once every twelve years, during the monkey year. Though suppressed during the Cultural Revolution, it was revived in approximately traditional form in 1992. (A second revived performance

in 2004 involved some remarkable departures from tradition: the festival was removed from the mountain hermitage at which it was formerly held to a site accessible by road, and it was compressed into just three days, rather than the traditional full week.) A description of its organization, as it was conducted in 1956, however, provides an excellent introduction to the intricate network of relationships – temporal, spatial, religious, and social – that characterizes all events of this type. The translation given here is slightly abridged, but many of the particular details mentioned will now be familiar, having been introduced in earlier sections of this book:

The Monkey Year Powa Chenmo is convened at a place called Drongur, situated in the valley of Zhotö Tidro, during the period from the seventh through the fifteenth of the sixth lunar month. The two hierarchs of Drigung Monastery – the Chetsang and Chungtsang Rinpoché – were the chief officiants for the religious performance, which began when they rode from Drigung Monastery to Drongur. On an astrologically propitious day, they spent a day performing the propitiations of Achi Chöki Drölma, the chief protective deity of Drigung. After prognostications favored continuing the ride, the lamas, incarnates, and monks of Drigung would guide the horseback journey by stages. Following casual ablutions and consecrations, the Lama of Drongur and the chief steward of the Terdrom convent would welcome the party at the base of Tidro Valley with incense, whereupon the chief steward would offer the world-mandala, the symbolic offering of the cosmos, together with an explanation of the sacred features of the site. That afternoon, together with an offering of fragrant incense to the local deities (*sang*) and other observances, they performed a circuit of the hot springs and then proceeded the rest of the way to Drongur. Then, with the nuns of Terdrom and the lamas of Drongur performing a procession known as the “yellow rosary,” they entered the stronghold of Drongur together. Following the admonitions of the leadership, the monks and nuns of Drongur and Terdrom made the preparations for the great teachings of the Monkey Year.

Besides that, the taxpayers and others belonging to the Drigung administration had to appear for an assessment of revenue and be forthcoming with their payments. Then, beginning on the sixth day of the sixth month, the monks of the two Drigung colleges, together with those practicing retreat, gradually had to assemble at Drongur. After riding up with the lamas who were officials of the colleges, they then had to invite into their presence the representations of the Buddhas’ Body, Speech, and Mind in the form of the images, books, and symbols that were installed at Drongur for the teachings. On the seventh day, the two colleges were asked separately to pitch their assembly tents – the assembly tent of Til, “Blue Heaven,” and that of Gar, “White Snow Peak,” had been the presentations of Pemé Gyeltsen, the twenty-ninth head of the lineage of Drigung (b. 1770). These two colleges

together would then request that the great tent of empowerment, the commission of the Ven. Thukje Nyima (the thirty-second head of the lineage), be pitched above the religious court of Drongur.

Four monk sergeants-at-arms, together with four deputies from the larger taxpaying households, would have to shoulder the responsibility of assuring adherence to the religious laws during the festival, along with the laws of the monastic and lay public in general. In the afternoon of the seventh day, at the valley closing the fortress of Drongur, all would have to listen to a proclamation of the ordinances of the religious law. Then by stages, following rounds in the camps of the two colleges, and the most important campsites of the public, the path was closed, and it was arranged that neither mundane business nor affairs involving unclean sorts of things should arrive there. The entire legal power for the duration of the religious assembly was then held as the responsibility of the sergeants-at-arms and their deputies.²¹

Following the completion of these preliminary arrangements, through which the valley of Drongur was transformed into a sealed and well-ordered realm, legally and ritually isolated from the surrounding world, the actual cycle of religious teaching would commence. This began on the eighth day of the lunar month, that is, at the half moon, and reached its culmination on the full-moon day, when the instructions for the rite of *powa*, whereby consciousness may be liberated at death, were publicly conferred:

During the eighth day there is the initial preparatory empowerment. When the assembled public is very numerous there are about thirty thousand, but if not then roughly twenty thousand. On the ninth day there is the empowerment of the Buddha and on the tenth day of the great festival, the two hierarchs don ceremonial garb of Central Asian origin, and they set up the parasol of peacock feathers that the [Chinese] emperor offered. [In this regalia] they confer the *torma*-empowerment of the peaceful guru, the empowerment of longevity, etc. During the following days they bestow the initiations of Avalokiteshvara and the Wrathful Guru, the rite for generation of the enlightened attitude, and such empowerments as those of Tara and Mañjushri.

On the fifteenth, the day of the full moon, the Drigung Powa Chenmo itself is conferred, a profound doctrine renowned throughout all the numberless districts of Tibet. The entire populace, high and low, harbors great hopes of receiving the Powa Chenmo. Anywhere throughout the east, center or west of Tibet, one who has obtained the Drigung Powa Chenmo is counted as being fortunate. In order to obtain it, many people, without regard to sectarian affiliation, travel from afar, undertaking many hardships to get there.²²

These concluding sentences are in no way an exaggeration. Similar remarks, moreover, may be made with respect to other major Tibetan pilgrimages, such as those to Kailash, Tsari, or, on a regular basis, the holy sites of Lhasa and central Tibet. In traditional society, participation in such pilgrimages was, and still remains, a desired goal for many. If Westerners tend to think of meditation as the characteristic expression of Buddhist faith, for Tibetans, besides such daily acts of devotion as performing prostrations and offering butter-lamps, the religious practice par excellence was without doubt pilgrimage.

It has often been remarked that Tibet, before its forced entry into the People's Republic of China, had only a very weak state structure, whose authority, such as it was, was supported by little coercive force. Indeed, large parts of the Tibetan world were often outside of the Central Tibetan state altogether, and were either subservient to other states, or local princes, or virtually stateless. Despite this, however, and despite the presence of strong tendencies, intensified by the exigencies of geography and poor systems of communication, to accentuate the particularisms of region, dialect, and sect, there were traditionally, and persist today, strong sentiments of affinity and cohesiveness running throughout the Tibetan cultural world. The relative coherence of Tibetan culture, considered in the light of the powerful forces that seem to oppose any such unifying disposition, presents a general problem in the study of Tibetan civilization.

Language, economic ties, and history all play their roles in explaining this, together with the considerable influences of Tibetan religion in general. It is in this context, however, that pilgrimage in particular may be seen as a major factor in the organization of Tibetan culture overall. By ordering the cycles of pilgrimage according to calendrical cycles, by establishing the locations visited and the routes traversed, and by promoting specific religious teachings, historical narratives and symbolic interpretations of the landscape and the events taking place within it, the Tibetan religious world constructed for its inhabitants a common order of time, space, and knowledge.