

# CIS Bulletin: Tibetan Buddhism

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Tibet is a mountainous region lying just north of the Himalayan Mountain range in central Asia covering 871,649 square miles. The region remained independent until the early 1900s, when it was occupied first by Great Britain and then by China. The Tibetans reasserted their independence from China in 1912 and retained it until 1951, when it was “liberated” by China. Today, Tibet is still occupied by China.

National boundaries are often determined by wars or by larger nations who set borders for their own advantage. As such, religions usually do not adhere to those borders and easily flow across them. Tibetan Buddhism, the principle subject of this Bulletin, is a prime example. Tibetan Buddhism can also be found in northern Nepal, parts of India, and parts of Mongolia and Russia, northeast China and Bhutan where it is the state religion

Tibetan Buddhism has spread to many Western countries where it has gained many followers, including a number of Hollywood movie stars: Richard Gere, Sharon Stone, Allen Ginsberg and Steven Seagal, who has been recognized as a reincarnated tulku (a high-ranking lama).

There are over two thousand tulkus today. The vast majority of tulkus and lamas are men although there are some women.

Tenzin Gyatso or Jetsun Jamphel Ngawang Lobsang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso (born 06 July 1935) is the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and is held to be the reincarnation of each of the previous thirteen Dalai Lamas of Tibet, who are in turn considered to be manifestations of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. A Bodhisattva is an enlightened being or Buddha who, out of compassion for others, forgoes or delays entering nirvana in order to lead others to enlightenment. Both the Dalai Lama and a secondary leader, the Teshu Lama (or Panchen Lama), are considered living Buddhas. The first Dalai Lama was Tsong - kha - pa (1357 – 1419).

The Dalai Lama is the most influential figure of the Gelug or Gelugpa, also known as the Yellow Hat sect, school of Tibetan Buddhism. Founded in 1409, the Gelug sect has been the most influential Tibetan Buddhist sect since the end of the 1600s. Beginning with the 5th Dalai Lama in the 17th century, the Dalai Lamas have held political control over central Tibet.

During a Tibetan uprising in 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet, denounced China, and established a government in exile in India.

The number of Tibetan Buddhist adherents is estimated to be between ten and twenty million.

## The First Tibetans

One of the popular myths about the beginning of the Tibetan people is the story of a *raksasi*, a large, ugly female monster popular in Hindu scriptures such as the Ramayana, and a monkey who arrived in Tibet for religious training. The *raksasi* or ogre persuaded the monkey to marry her, threatening that if he didn't, she would kill thousands of humans. From this marriage, five offspring were born which are said to have been the first Tibetans.

Archaeologists, however, believe Tibetans today are

descendants of aboriginal Tibetans and nomadic, ethnic Chinese sheep-herders from the Qiang (the name means “shepherd”) tribes who migrated into Tibet from an area just east of Tibet. Archaeologists have traced the history of people in Tibet to about 2,000 B.C., although people almost certainly lived in and/or migrated through the area for thousands of years earlier. Historical records of Tibet are relatively scarce until about the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It was at this time that Yarlung Dynasty (Tubo Kingdom) under the first king

of Tibet, Nyatri Tsenpo, unified Tibet.

## Bon (Short for Bonpo)

Bon, also called Bo or the Black Religion (because of the clothes worn by Bon monks), is an animistic religion that arose in Tibet in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. According to Bon, all of nature, including sky, earth, sun, moon, lightning, thunder, mountains, rivers, animals, plants, etc. are inhabited by spirits and are worthy of worship. Some of these spirits are good and some are evil. Followers, under the guidance of a shaman (a person who can contact and attempts to control the spirit world), practice divination, prayer, exorcisms, sacrifice and supernatural magic to appease these spirits. When Buddhism arrived in Tibet in about the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. an attempt was made to suppress Bon, and although the suppression was partially successful at various times, Bon was never completely eradicated. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D., a Buddhist leader attempted to wipe out Bon, but he was assassinated and replaced by a Bon leader, who was later assassinated and replaced by another Buddhist. Today, Bon is again on the upsurge.

Bon have borrowed many Buddhist practices such as sutras, use of beads and mantras, and the erection of monasteries where Bon Buddhas reside. There are nearly 100 Bon monasteries in Tibet with more than 3,000 Bon monks



residing in them. Likewise, Tibetan Buddhists have borrowed practiced from the Bon, including some of the many spirits and deities found in Bon. For example, Buddhists believe Mt. Everest is inhabited by a female spirit or goddess and that the successful climber must never leave trash on the mountain or sleep with his/her feet toward the mountain, else the climber will not have a successful climb to the summit.

Another Tibetan myth tells of seven brothers who cut trees and carried stones to build a large building in one night as shelter for common people from an upcoming storm. Afterward, the brothers were invited to heaven to build houses for Gods. They are seen in the sky as the stars in the Big Dipper and are called the "Dipper Brothers."

### Rise of Tantrism

Mantras (certain words or phrases believed to have great spiritual value, commonly used in Hinduism), mudras (hand gestures), mandalas (colorful diagrams of sand or rocks usually in circular form; the term means "sacred circle" that protects the mind.) and visualization of various deities had become an important part of some sub-sects of Mahayana or northern Buddhism. These beliefs and practices gradually evolved into another sect of Buddhism called Vajrayana. Although found in countries other than Tibet, Vajrayana, also called Tantrayana or Tantrism, borrowed from the Bon tradition in Tibet and had a major impact on Buddhism in Tibet.

Tantra is a Sanskrit word, which means transmitting teachings in an esoteric way. It is practiced by following a teacher or "guru" believed proficient in using manuals or handbooks that describe the techniques of attaining enlightenment or Buddhahood, the goal of all Buddhists. Tantra is a complicated system of beliefs and practices, which is supposed to be fully understood only by the "gurus." These "gurus" are also called "Lamas." A Lama is a person who is proficient in Tantrism. Tibetan Buddhism is sometimes called Lamaism.

### Tibetan Buddhism or Lamaism

Tibetan Buddhists simply refer to their faith as Buddhism, leaving off the adjective "Tibetan." When Buddhism arrived in Tibet, Buddhist leaders almost immediately began to translate their scriptures into the local language. This helped spread Buddhism across Tibet. After several centuries of conflict with the Bon, Buddhism enjoyed a revival in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century and has not looked back.

The **four main sects** of Tibetan Buddhism are: 1) the Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) order, headed by the Dalai Lama; 2) the Kagyupa (Red Hat) order; 3) Nyingmapa order; and 4) the Sakyapa order. The Nyingmapa Order is the oldest, dating back to the 8th century. The Kagyupa (Red Hat) order and the Sakyapa order emerged around the same time in the 11th century. The Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) order emerged in the 15th century as a purer form of Buddhism at a time when the other sects were regarded as corrupt. The color of the hats refers to the elaborate crescent-shaped hats worn by followers during ceremonies. Sometimes the Red Hat term is used to describe all non-Yellow Hat sects. A sub-sect of the Red Hat sect is called the Black Hat sect because the leader, the Karmapa

Lama, wears a black ceremonial hat.

The various sects struggled for dominance as they emerged. But for the most part the four that remain today complement one another; don't compete and try to remain in harmony.

**The five Great Buddhas of Wisdom** are a central feature of Tibetan Buddhist belief and art. They are often found in Tibetan mandalas and thangkas. Each Buddha is believed to be capable of overcoming a particular evil with a particular good.

The five Wisdom Buddhas each have a consort or female Buddha who is associated with them. Vairocana or Mahāvairocana Buddha, the Buddha of Wisdom whose consort is called White Tara, is at the center of the five Wisdom Buddhas and is the celestial Buddha who is often interpreted as the Enlightened Body of the historical Gautama Buddha; he is sometimes referred to as the great solar Buddha. The five Wisdom Buddhas are held to be transcendent Buddhas visualized in tantric meditation.

One of the five is Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, who is the Buddha of the Western Paradise or the Pure Land, a type of Buddhism called Pure Land Buddhism, which is popular in Hawaii and the U. S.

An enigmatic aspect of Tibetan Buddhist iconography is the presence of ferocious, terrifying forms known as the **wrathful deities**. Though these hideous, hair-raising images seem contradictory to Buddhist ideals, they are not personifications of evil or demonic forces.

Rather, the wrathful deities are benevolent gods who symbolize the tremendous effort it takes to vanquish evil, the violence that is a fundamental reality of the cosmos and the human mind and protect the faithful by instilling terror in evil spirits.

The most important category of wrathful deities is the group of **eight dharmapalas**. The dharmapalas, or defenders of Buddhism, are divinities with the rank of Bodhisattva who wage war without any mercy against the demons and enemies of Buddhism. These eight wrathful deities, which can be worshipped as a group of "Eight Terrible Ones" or individually:

1. A fierce goddess of the city of Lhasa and the only feminine wrathful deity
2. "White Brahma"
3. "Hidden Sheet of Mail"
4. The god of death, often shown gripping the Tibetan wheel of life
5. The god of wealth and the only wrathful deity who is never represented in a fierce form
6. "Great Black One"
7. "Horse Neck"
8. "Conqueror of Yama, or Death"

Worship of the wrathful deities was initiated in the 8th century by a magician-saint who is said to have conquered the evil deities in Tibet and forced them to vow to protect Buddhists and the Buddhist faith.

Images of the wrathful deities are kept in the homes and temples of Tibetan Buddhists to protect them against evil influences and remind them to destroy passion and evil in themselves.

The goddess of universal compassion, Tara, which means “star” in Sanskrit, represents virtuous and enlightened action. Her Tibetan name is Sgrol-ma, meaning “she who enlightens.” It is said that her compassion for living beings is stronger than a mother’s love for her children. She also brings about longevity, protects earthly travel, and guards her followers on their spiritual journey to enlightenment. Before she was adopted by Buddhism, Tara was worshipped in Hinduism as a manifestation of the goddess Parvati. Parvati is a consort of Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction and rejuvenation. Parvati is generally considered a gentile goddess, but when Parvati is in a bad mood and fearful, she is called by names such as Kali (the Indian city of Calcutta or Kolkata gets its name from Kali) or Durga.

Typically found in Tibetan areas are the many **Prayer Flags** that decorate monasteries, houses and even mountain passes. It is believed that the special blessing power of the mantras printed on them is spread all over the world by the wind. The tradition stems from pre-Buddhist traditions in Tibet, just as the the so-called Wind horse which is often found on them. Traditionally, prayer flags have a combination of mantras, special prayers and auspicious symbols printed on them. Prayer flags are not only strung on ropes to hang between two poles, they can also be hung like a flag from one pole.

Usually, the flags come in five different colors: blue corresponds with the sky, white with clouds, red with fire, green with water and yellow with earth.

The **Wind Horse**, a mythical Tibetan creature from pre-Buddhist times, combines the speed of the wind and the strength of the horse to carry prayers from earth to the heavens.

**Prayer Wheels** are another typical Tibetan phenomena. They are usually crammed with mantras, and as with prayer flags, it is taught that the power of the mantras will spread when the wheel is turned. Prayer wheels come in many variations; from handheld to huge ones that require major effort to turn. They can also be moved by hand, water or wind.

## The Buddha’s Teaching

All of Buddhism seeks to find the answer to and remove the cause of suffering. The Buddha taught this as the Four Noble Truths:

1. All of life consists of suffering.
2. Suffering is caused by greed and desire.
3. A person can be free of suffering.
4. The path to that freedom is the Noble Eightfold Path.

Although different from prayer wheels, the symbol of Buddhism is the 8-spoked wheel which reminds Buddhists of the Buddha’s teaching or Dharma found in the Noble Eightfold Path:

1. Right world view.
2. Right intention.

3. Right speech.
4. Right action.
5. Right livelihood.
6. Right occupation.
7. Right mindfulness.
8. Right meditation.

Only by following the Noble Eightfold Path can a person be free from suffering, achieve “enlightenment,” and reach Nirvana. Achieving enlightenment is not a simple process, as we shall see. If a person does not achieve enlightenment, he/she must be reincarnated in another body to continue that journey.

Between the incarnations, the person wanders through one or more of six realms:

1. The divine heavens of the gods.
2. The human world.
3. The titan realms.
4. The animal realms.
5. The hungry-ghost realm.
6. The hell realm.

Of the six realms, only the divine and human worlds are considered desirable. A person will wander through one of these realms between each lifetime unless he/she achieves enlightenment. To avoid the undesirable realms, Tibetans make pilgrimages to temples and holy places, prostrate themselves before statues of Buddhas, pray and perform a myriad of other rituals.

A Buddhist takes refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddhism:

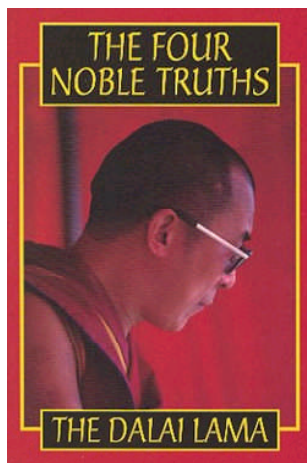
1. I take refuge in the Buddha.
2. I take refuge in the Dharma, the Buddha’s teachings.
3. I take refuge in the Sangha, or the community of monks. The Sangha assists in and reinforces an individual’s efforts in moving toward enlightenment.

A Tibetan Buddhist adds a fourth Jewel, “I go for refuge to my Lama,” before the other three. The Lama is a living model of enlightenment.

Tibetan Buddhists pray what is called “the refuge prayer:”

I take refuge in you, kind Root Lama and in your lineage. Together, with all beings who are as limitless as space. I take refuge in all the glorious and holy lamas. I take refuge in the yidams [deities who help with meditation] and deities assembled in their mandalas. I take refuge in the Buddhas, transcendent conquerors. I take refuge in the holy Dharma teachings. I take refuge in the exalted Sangha.

A Buddhist prostrates his/her body on the floor as he repeats “the refuge prayer,” which may be repeated thousands of times over the span of months or years. Some Buddhists will do 300 prostrations several times a day. Individual prostrations are counted on beads or mala.



In addition to the prostrations, a second necessary practice is the repetition of a mantra ["Om Mani Padme Hung"] while visualizing a white lotus and invoking Vajrasattva, the Buddha of purification. This practice drives out impurities and negative influences (pride, jealousy, desire, ignorance, greed and anger). Disciples are encouraged to repeat the mantra at least 1,000 times a day so that his/her body will become blessed and even benefit others who come into contact with the disciple. It is especially beneficial to repeat the mantra while turning a prayer wheel.

Other mantras are secret and are revealed only to disciples who have been initiated into higher or deeper meditative practices.

Visualization is important in Tibetan Buddhism. Light is believed to flow from the Lama to the head, throat and heart of the disciple as he/she receives refuge with the Lama's protection and blessing. The disciple's self merges with Chenresig, "the earthly manifestation of the self born, eternal Buddha, Amitabha," in the person of the Lama. Chenresig, [the white lotus is a symbol of Chenresig] is a four-armed deity who resides with Amitabha in Nirvana.

Pilgrimages to holy places are very important. These are often to stupas, which may contain the relics of a Buddha or other holy person such as a Lama.

Building a stupa and performing any other work on it are considered work of the highest purity and merit. Buddhists always show their devotion by circling the stupa clockwise. Doing this can also accumulate merit. The size and style of stupa may vary from very large to small portable stupas which can be carried.

Pilgrimages to the place of the Buddha's enlightenment are especially meritorious.

The motivations for pilgrimages among the Tibetan people are many, but for the ordinary Tibetan it amounts to a means of accumulating merit or good luck. The lay practitioner might go on a pilgrimage in hopes of winning a better rebirth, to cure an illness, to end a spate of bad luck or simply because of a vow to take a pilgrimage if a Bodhisattva granted a wish.

In Tibet there are countless sacred destinations, ranging from lakes and mountains to monasteries and caves that once served as meditation retreats. Specific pilgrimages are often prescribed for specific ills; certain mountains for example expiate certain sins. A circumambulation (known as a "Kora") of Mt. Kailash offers the possibility of liberation from the wheel of life [reincarnation], while a Kora of Lake Manasarovar can result in spontaneous Buddha-hood. — <http://www.shangrilatours.com/custom.html>.

The disciple must take a vow to continue on their path toward enlightenment, to become a Bodhisattva to help others achieve enlightenment.

Becoming a Bodhisattva is not easily or quickly achieved. The Buddha is always ready to assist a disciple on his journey, but it is up to the disciple to seek this help. A disciple must go through ten levels of meditation. At some point in these levels, a disciple stops accumulating new karma and only has to remove old karma. At each level, defilements (karma) are

removed and greater virtues received. This can be described as having a painful cut. When the cut heals, the pain leaves but the scar is present. Later, even the scar disappears.

As each layer of karma is removed, a disciple continues his/her journey toward enlightenment.

When all coverings are removed & the power of the virtue that he has built up is at its full height there is nothing a person cannot do. His body can multiply indefinitely & he can give teaching on all levels, from the beginning to the goal. The virtue of a Buddha's mind is that even a small part of it knows the reality of everything. This Buddha stage is the effect of many causes achieved through an enormous amount of Dharma practice. — *The Graduated Path to Liberation or Lam Rim by Geshe Rabten* at <http://www.abuddhist-library.com/Buddhism/A%20-%20Tibetan%20Buddhism>.

Until a disciple achieves enlightenment, he/she will experience reincarnation in an infinite number of lives.

Nirvana is the Buddhist term for liberation. Nirvana literally means "extinction," and it refers to the extinction of all craving, an extinction that allows one to achieve enlightenment or liberation from the cycles of reincarnation.

Buddhism rejects the Hindu idea of a soul, instead, holding that a person consists of a "bundle of habits, memories, sensations, desires, and so forth, which together delude one into thinking that he or she consists of a stable, lasting self." Even though Buddhists reject the idea of an eternal soul, it is believed the "self" hangs together through the various reincarnations.

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, believed written in the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D., is a guide for the dying and dead and explains what happens between death and either entrance into nirvana or into another body for rebirth in the physical world.

At death, the spirit of the departed goes through a process lasting forty-nine days (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* gives this figure but many Buddhists don't take it literally.), and then either goes on to nirvana or returns in another physical body to continue its path toward enlightenment. Nirvana is not a place as much as it is simply the elimination of all desire and the resulting karma. It could be described as a state of bliss and illustrated as where a flame on a candle goes when the flame is extinguished.

Professor Leazer taught a world religions course at Mercer University - Atlanta campus - during the second summer term; he is teaching two world religions classes at Mercer during the fall term and will teach two additional world religions classes during the spring semester.

He always takes the first summer term off to conduct research on the world religions or to take mission trips. In recent years he has taken mission trips to Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Havana, Cuba, where he taught courses on witnessing to cults or preached in churches.

There should be no such thing as an inactive member in any church.