Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism

The Foundations of Authority in Gelukpa Monasticism

Martin A. Mills
IDENTITY, RITUAL AND STATE IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM
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Martin A. Mills
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Understanding a book, as with anything else, is often as much a question of appreciating its origins as of comprehending its contents; this work is no different in this regard. Most orthodox Tibetan philosophers and theologians identify two kinds of origin to phenomena: deep causes (rgyü) and immediate conditions (rken). The most obvious immediate conditions for this work are the initial eighteen months of fieldwork carried out in the Himalayan, and predominantly Tibetan Buddhist, kingdom of Ladakh (in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir) between 1993 and 1995. During this time I had the great good fortune to spend six months living in and researching the ritual life of the Gelukpa order monastery of Kumbum (‘One Hundred Thousand Images’) in Lingshed village, an isolated agricultural community within the Zangskar mountain range of Southern Ladakh. Whilst of immense importance to the inhabitants of Lingshed and its surrounding villages, Kumbum is not one of Tibetan Buddhism’s great monasteries, and certainly cannot compare in grandeur to the vast monastic universities that the Gelukpa order maintained in old Tibet: it houses none of the order’s many incarnate lamas, no noted schools of Buddhist dialectics, no cadre of famed tantric yogins. But it does its job — seeing to the ritual needs of local households, educating its coterie of sixty-odd monks to a level which allows them either to perform rites with competence, or enter the higher echelons of the newly-reformed Gelukpa educational system (now working in exile in India and Nepal) with confidence. Unlike its more impressive cousins, moreover, Kumbum has an unbroken tradition of Gelukpa practice, maintained in situ since its foundation by the Gelukpa luminary Changsems Sherabs Zangpo in the 1440s. The greater bulk of this book is therefore about Kumbum and Lingshed: in this regard it is an ethnography like many others, a small contribution to a growing corpus of Western academic knowledge about the particulars of the Tibetan Buddhist monastic tradition.
Beyond this, however, the book seeks to address one principal question, a question which, I would argue, has largely been taken for granted in much writing on Tibetan religion: that is, how we are to understand the nature of religious authority in Tibetan Buddhist monasticism. To a certain extent, this theoretical blindspot should surprise no-one: despite a vast quantity of material on the nature of power and resistance to power written by religious specialists, sociologists and anthropologists over the last thirty years, little in the way of real advancement has occurred in our understanding of the constitution of authority since the days of Max Weber, who in many ways still gets the last word. In many writings, the terms power and authority are treated as synonymous; this however, neglects much of the term’s etymology as a word semantically akin to ‘authorship’. So, for the purposes of this work, let me start by making explicit how I define the term: authority is the formation of statements which are widely accepted as true within a certain social field, organised around particular persons in particular circumstances.

This issue is one which, in my own intellectual history, dates back to my first reading of Stanley Royal Mumford’s extraordinary work, *Himalayan Dialogue* (Mumford 1989), in which he addresses the question in terms of the synthesis of overlapping discourses that emerged in the cultural space between a Nyingmapa Buddhist community in Nepal and its Gurung shaman neighbours. Central to this question is a deeper one: how do particular traditions and communities constitute notions of truth in any particular context?

The questions indirectly raised in Mumford’s book are important for a variety of reasons, which are relevant both to the anthropological and sociological study of Tibetan Buddhism (which is the main angle from which my own analysis is taken), and to the question of the cultural impact of the west’s academic and intellectual involvement with Tibetan Buddhism. By and large, these two areas overlap in the sense that intellectual theorising often serves to elaborate and frame less explicit cultural tensions and trends. In the context at hand, many academics and intellectuals have lent their pens to the wider cultural process – prevalent throughout the post-industrial west – of questioning, ‘rendering transparent’ and undermining existing structures of social and religious authority. Inherent in this project is the maxim that ‘power’ and ‘authority’ are inherently bad things – that any system based upon them is therefore intrinsically flawed. More specifically, any system of thought in which social truth is established through the exercise of power or authority is thereby in some sense fallacious. In many respects, this maxim derives from a long history of European and American objectivist philosophy, in which ‘truth’ is only deemed to be defendable (dependable, solid) if people are in some sense removed from the equation. The notion, common within the social sciences, that ‘reality is socially constructed’ (Berger and Luckmann
1966) has not, on the whole, led us to seek a new understanding of what we
mean by our own notions of truth and reality, but instead to constantly
whittle away at existing ideological structures on the assumption that if we
divest the world of socially-constructed truth and reality, all that is left must
therefore be ‘truly’ true and real. No matter how hard we try, we cannot
divest ourselves of the deeply held conviction that a truth that is ‘socially
constructed’ is really no truth at all. In the social sciences in particular, this
has led to an endlessly reiterative process of ‘unmasking’ the structures of
power that lie behind ideas, whether they be religious, political or scientific:
to show them to be contingent, negotiated, imperfect. Behind this, the
possibility that an objective reality – a truly ‘democratic’ and objective
truth – haunts us all, a glimpsed image just beyond the next wall of smoke
and mirrors.

With this kind of context, it is perhaps unsurprising that many modern
Buddhist scholars – and most particularly those influenced by this culture of
re-iterative deconstruction – have sought, in defence of Buddhism, to
present it as a system of thought that is, to a great extent, devoid of ‘social
construction’. In this endeavour, the relationship between authority and
truth in the Tibetan Buddhist domain has been increasingly sidestepped by
an influential vanguard of Buddhist academics in the west, who seek to
present the question of Buddhist truth in a fundamentally objectivist
manner – that Buddhism is above all a philosophy whose claims to truth are
devoid of doctrinal and ecclesiastical influence. That such a presentation is
itself politically and socially motivated – based on the wish to sell
Buddhism to a post-Christian and ostensibly post-religious West, is hardly a
novel revelation; what is perplexing is the strength with which this growing
orthodoxy is argued for in the Tibetan Buddhist case.

Such a case is, after all, not easy to make. The West’s initial encounter
with Buddhism occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth century as
part of the colonial exploitation of Theravada Buddhist regions. It was
mediated by long periods of the religion’s dormancy (meaning the
‘discovery’ even of Bodhgaya – the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment in
North India – was primarily a victory of British archaeology and philology,
rather than an encounter with a living tradition). In those countries where
European scholars could study Buddhism as a living tradition, it was
mediated by the very conditions of colonial rule – conditions which
themselves spawned religious reform movements amongst the very sections
of the indigenous population which were ‘presenting’ Buddhism to
European scholars (see Gombrich 1988; Gombrich and Obeyesekere
1989). By contrast, the West’s most systematic encounter with Tibetan
Buddhism began at the height of Central Tibet’s political independence
under the 13th and then 14th Dalai Lamas. Political, social and legal rule in
Tibetan regions was channelled through a highly developed system of
ecclesiastical and aristocratic institutions that maintained a self-conscious-
ness largely unalloyed by the kind of European colonial modernities that, for example, led to the rise of forms of politically and ideologically 'reformed' Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Instead, Tibetan Buddhism maintains powerful features that are anathema to many 'modern' Western Buddhists: with tutelage constituted through a system of guru-worship, it is profoundly hierarchical and respect-oriented both in its theory and its application; its practice is shot through with ritualised behaviour, shamanic visions and the extensive 'superstitions' of demonology and exorcism; socially and ritually its indigenous forms remain dominated by priestly elites whose traditional relations with state power remain ideologically if not politically intact and, in the form of the Dalai, Panchen and Karmapa Lamas, contains strong echoes of the sacral kingships of Europe's medieval theocracies. At the same time, Tibetan Buddhism contains at its heart ethical and philosophical schools of thought whose acuity and power is both highly self-consistent, intellectually and morally challenging, and unexpectedly influential amongst industrialised populations that themselves grow disaffected with the global ideological apparatuses of post-capitalist materialism, which tell them ever more insistently what they should be doing, but not why.

The clear integration of these two sides to Tibetan Buddhism – the apparently 'rational/philosophical' and the deeply 'social/cultural' – has presented modern Buddhist academics and intellectuals with a veritable Gordian knot, and their solution has been little different from that of Alexander: to take a knife to it, leaving two halves – with questions of Buddhist truth and philosophy being dealt with by philosophically-minded philologists, and the question of power and authority (and by extension, ritual and superstition) handed over to sociologists, historians and anthropologists.

This rather classic post-Enlightenment (in the European historical sense of the term) division of intellectual labour allows Buddhist philosophy to be reconstructed as a socially-denatured 'great tradition'; by extension, large swathes of Tibetan Buddhist life become consigned to the explicitly inferior category of 'folk tradition' or, worse, to the intellectual dustbin of 'local superstition'. Crucial to this process is the evocation of certain clear criteria as to what makes the 'real essence of religion', as opposed to its cultural, social and political 'accretions': criteria of rationality, anti-authoritarian individualism and ethical liberalism that are largely perceived to be the actual qualities of every approved-of religion's founding figures, but which have been corrupted by subsequent generations of (usually patriarchal and socially-conservative) religious rule. In reconstituting the category of Buddhist philosophy, then, there has been a strong, and often exclusive examination of the textual products, the _writings_ of Tibetan religious virtuos, a logocentrism which has proved remarkably productive and convincing in a diaspora climate in which studying Tibetan Buddhist
religiosity in its established social and cultural context – that is, in Tibet and the Himalayas – has proven remarkably difficult.

The dangers of attempting to distil out such a ‘pure’ religious tradition have been pointed out by a variety of Buddhist scholars, most particularly in the study of Theravada Buddhism (see for example Obeyesekere 1962; Southwold 1982; Spencer 1990b; Tambiah 1976). Moreover, understanding the reasoning behind the requirement to perform such radical analytical surgery on extant religious and ritual traditions is harder than it may at first seem. As with the complex landscape of revisions that have occurred within the Christian tradition, the regular insistence on modernity and rationality often hides more complex cultural processes associated with the rise of individualism, capitalism and the ideological separation of Church and State. Following on from the ground-breaking historical work of Gombrich and Obeyesekere on the rise of ‘Protestant Buddhism’ in Sri Lanka moreover, Donald Lopez, Jr. and David Gellner have argued strongly that the ‘rationalist’ emphasis of many modernist treatments of Mahayana (and particularly Tibetan) Buddhism contain within them a thinly-veiled post-Reformation bias against ritual and clericalism that is arguably inappropriate to the study of non-theistic religious traditions (Gellner 1990; Lopez 1996, 1998).

Clearly, in the years prior to the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, such theoretical preoccupations would have remained exactly that – theoretical. In the decades since that time, however, events both inside Tibet and in the wider world have meant that Tibetan Buddhism has entered into an extraordinary pact with western culture, one in which the cultural preoccupations of westerners have a powerful impact upon the continuation of Tibetan Buddhism as a living tradition (Adams 1994; Lopez 1998). As a result, the stakes on the game of smoke and mirrors that is the western preoccupation with Buddhism are presently remarkably high. To put it more bluntly, the danger exists that we can do violence to Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism, simply by seeing in this most important of ritual and spiritual traditions only what we (as ourselves the products of a certain shattered religious history) desire of it.

In what follows, therefore, I have attempted to build a picture of Tibetan Buddhist life that begins by asking what it itself is, rather than what it should be. In particular, I have attempted to move away from a logocentric approach which either sees Tibetan Buddhism as defined by explicit written teachings, or as centred around them. Rather, for the purposes of this work, I have sought to examine the practice of Tibetan Buddhism in a particular context (primarily, the relationship between monastery and village in the Trans-Sengge-La region of modern Ladakh), in order to see what it can tell us about how we should interpret the intellectual content of Tibetan Buddhist texts. In order to do this, I have attempted to unpack and bring to light the implicit context within which the explicit religious teachings and
exegesis are couched: context such as the structures of social and ritual hierarchy, the criteria for and construction of ecclesiastical authority and religious truth, and the culturally-constituted understandings of social and ritual personhood and influence, that are in their entirety not distinct from the teachings of Buddhism, but rather serve to render them meaningful and persuasive to Tibetans and Ladakhis.

As I mentioned above, the primary issue that I have addressed in this work is the question of religious authority in Tibetan Buddhism. In doing so, I have focused primarily on three overlapping areas of analysis: local ritual activity at a village level, the ecclesiastical structure of Gelukpa monasticism, and the ideological and ritual foundations of Tibetan political consciousness. Working from the primary ethnographic focus of a local-level monastery in Ladakh, this will doubtless be regarded by some as an ambitious, if not downright foolhardy, level of generalisation. I suspect that in many areas of study, such a comment would be warranted; in the field of Tibetan studies, however, such a degree of regularity (or at least constant variation on a set series of themes) has arisen in textual and ethnographic research that we can follow David Snellgrove in asserting the historical existence of a definable Tibetan Buddhist civilization whose broad contours are knowable (Snellgrove 1966). Indeed, it is my argument that that very homogeneity derives from an identifiable cultural dynamic by which Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism manifests itself in Tibetan and Himalayan regions.

In building up a sense of this dynamic, I have drawn initially on Mumford’s insight that understandings of Buddhist authority in Tibetan and Himalayan communities are built around the ability to control local chthonic spirits and deities. The ‘cult’ of such spirits – from powerful local area gods down to household gods and water-spirits – is ubiquitous to Tibetan and Himalayan regions, and often associated with the pre-Buddhist Bon religion, a shadow from the region’s cultural past. Traditionally, the cult of local deities has been relegated to the status of ‘folk tradition’ by most analysts, and indeed is usually regarded as interacting with Buddhist institutions in the manner of a corrupting or compromising influence. Such models of religiosiety depend on the assumption that local spirit worship can be counted as a religious tradition of a comparable nature to Buddhism, and therefore that their relationship is one of either contrast, syncretism or contestation. In what follows I argue that such an assumption is mistaken (see in particular Chapter Ten), and that instead local deity worship in Tibetan and Himalayan regions is part of a powerful (but largely implicit, or at least not textually formulated) cultural construction of the social and ritual capacities of humans, one which conceives of embodied personhood as the nexus of productive and reproductive relationships with local
chthonic sources, embedded within the wider landscape in which a person is born. These relationships are reified through models of the body as an internal 'map' of local chthonic influences. It is this practical understanding of the ritual constitution and powers of humans within Tibetan Buddhist cultures that is, in turn, the focus of Buddhism's fundamentally transformative dynamic as a renunciatory religion. This core cultural dynamic has repercussions throughout the entire structure of Buddhist monastic, ecclesiastical and ritual practice in Tibetan areas, and these repercussions are the focus of much of the remaining argument.

Part One is both an historical description of the foundations of Gelukpa order in Tibet and Ladakh, a preliminary ethnographic discussion of the temples, offices and institutions of Gelukpa monasticism, as practised in Kumbum monastery in Ladakh, and their social relationship with nearby 'sponsor' villages. Here, I argue that ordinary monks within the Gelukpa order, whilst involved in the bona fide renunciation of the processes of production and reproduction, are in many senses only 'semi-renouncers', remaining structurally embedded within local household groups.

Parts Two and Three examine ritual life in Lingshed, both within the confines of Kumbum monastery, and in its performance of ritual duties on behalf of local villagers and householders. This is divided into two parts: Part Two is given over to the analysis of tantra as a system of truth and power, both in terms of the philosophical and meditative precepts underlying it, and in terms of the use of symbolic structures such as mandalas as systems for the subjugation of chthonic domains. It further examines the manner in which tantric systems focused on the 'yoking' of the identities of lama and tutelary Buddha (yidam) act as fulcrum of hierarchical religious authority within the ritual jurisdiction of monasteries such as Lingshed. Part Three is given over to an analysis of rites performed on behalf of laity. This begins with an analysis of local cosmologies at village and household level, and of ritual methods for the propitiation of, and defence against, local deities and spirits. This is followed by an examination of rites performed by members of Kumbum monastery to these same ends — including skangsol expelling rites (Chapter Seven); chosil, the recitation of sacred texts (Chapter Seven); offering (sangsol) and purification (trus) rites to local deities (Chapter Eight).

Many of these rites share a common dynamic geared towards the purification of chthonic territories, and the setting up of complex tensions between the 'worldly' (jigtenpa – the local and chthonic) and that which transcends the boundaries of the worldly – that is, the 'supraworldly' (jigtenlasdaspa) presence of Buddhas. The tension between these two is also a marked feature of the monastic hierarchy within the Gelukpa order itself; this is the topic of Part Four. Drawing on the work of Part Three, a variety of thresholds are identified in the accepted limits of the ritual authority ascribed to ordinary monks in Lingshed, resulting from their perceived
embeddedness within the chthonic matrices of local territories. In particular, this means that, whilst such monks may perpetuate ritual traditions designed to maintain the subjection of local deities and spirits to both Buddhism the monastery's village sponsors, they are incapable of instigating such ritual traditions, because to do so would involve an act of authority over a domain in which they remain firmly embedded (Chapters Ten and Twelve).

Overcoming this embeddedness in local chthonic personhood, moreover, requires transcendence of the very processes of embodiment that anchor individuals within the matrix of forces that is their natal territory. This is usually achieved through systems of yogic renunciation, and in most cases the employment of sexual yoga (one of the six systems of Naropa) as a means of finally overcoming attachment to the body (Chapter Eleven), and thus its subjugation to local chthonic powers. Formally at least, such measures are off limits to members of Tsongkhapa's Gelukpa order, which stresses celibacy as the basis of ecclesiastical status. Instead, the transformations evoked in sexual yoga are accomplished through modes of death yoga (also part of Naropa's six yogas). As a result, those figures who are accepted as truly being manifestations of Buddhahood (tulku) within the Gelukpa order, are invariably the reincarnation of important yogins – i.e. Gelukpa yogins who have died. The result of this renunciatory logic is that, unlike other schools – where the semblance of tulku status is attainable within a single lifetime of non-celibate yogic endeavour – the Gelukpa maintain a quantum divide between ordinary monks and those incarnates capable of subjugating local deities through new ritual cycles, a divide which has important repercussions for the organisation of the order, and its maintenance of ritual dominance (Chapter Twelve).

The analysis of ritual authority discussed above is not intended to apply to purely the Gelukpa: its fundamental logic, I would argue, applies with just as much strength, if different end results, to those Tibetan Buddhist schools (the Nyingmapa, the Kagyudpa and Sakyapa) whose relationship with sexual yoga is more fluid. Similarly, its repercussions are not limited to the field of religious authority as we would conceive of it. In Ladakh, as with pre-invasion Tibet, the evocation of state authority depended to a large extent on the culturally-constructed dynamic between local god and tantric yogin. In Part Five, I examine this construction of diffuse stately authority with specific reference to the criticism laid against Tibetan Buddhism by Marxist thinkers, that Tibetan Buddhism served to support feudal exploitation in Tibet by suppressing the political and social consciousness of the peasantry. Instead, I argue that the ‘peasant productive consciousness’ championed in theory by Marxist scholars was in fact a primarily chthonic one in which social agency was conceived in chthonic terms. Moreover, this chthonic consciousness so suffused ecclesiastical life in traditional Tibet, and placed such limits on the construction of religious
authority, that it, *rather than Buddhism*, can be seen to be the hegemonic ideological discourse of traditional Tibetan society. Chinese Communist attempts to eradicate it, along with most other forms of religious consciousness in Tibet, thus represents possibly one of the greatest ironies of modern Asian history.
A NOTE ON THE TRANSLITERATION OF LADAKHI, TIBETAN AND SANSKRIT TERMS

The transliteration of indigenous terms in any of the Tibetan dialects is never easy. Both Tibetan and Ladakhi contain a wide assortment of unpronounced letters, and pronunciation rules that are anything but intuitive to the native English speaker. Thankfully, Tibetan and Ladakhi share both a common written ‘alphabet’ and the vast majority of their religious terminology, although they may differ somewhat on precise issues of pronunciation (by and large, Ladakhis pronounce more of the written consonants than Tibetans do). Generally, transliterating directly from the written Tibetan or Ladakhi has been abandoned by most modern writers, for the very good reason that it makes most words appear unpronounceable, and provides no aid to spoken communication. Following this trend, I have used the verbal Ladakhi pronunciation as the basis of indigenous transcription: these terms are to be found in unprefaced italics. Their precise transliteration is to be found in Appendix B, where I have used Turrell Wylie’s widely-accepted system (set out in his 1959 paper ‘A Standard System of Tibetan Transcription’ HJAS, 22: 261–7).

In many cases, the use of established Sanskrit terms (such as Buddha, bodhicitta, etc.) has been necessary, if only because they are part of the everyday vocabulary of Buddhist studies. Such terms I have left unitalicised, except perhaps on their first use, or if they are highly technical and once-off translations of Ladakhi terms (when they will be italicised, and prefaced by a S.). I have, moreover, avoided the complex and highly precise diacritics used for specialist discussions of Sanskrit. This is hardly a perfect solution; however, since this is primarily an ethnographic and anthropological work rather than a historical-philological study, I must simply point interested readers towards the many excellent studies of Indic Buddhism for a closer linguistic analysis.
PART ONE

THE FACE OF MONASTICISM
FIGURE 1 Ladakh and Zangskar on the South Asian map (for inset see Figure 2).
FIGURE 2 Kumbum's surrounding towns and monasteries in Ladakh and Zangskar.
Figure 3 The Trans-Sengge-La Area – Lingshed and its surrounding villages.
CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY AND AUTHORITY

There are none left to be trained by me. Because there are none left for me to train, I will demonstrate the way to nirvana to inspire those who are slothful to the doctrine and to demonstrate that what is compounded is impermanent. The snowy domain to the north [i.e. Tibet] is presently a domain of animals, so even the word 'human being' does not exist there – it is a vast darkness. And all who die there turn not upwards but, like snowflakes falling on a lake, drop into the world of evil destinies [i.e. the hells and so forth]. At some future time, when that doctrine declines, you, O Bodhisattva, will train them. First, the incarnation of a Bodhisattva will generate human beings who will require training. Then, they will be brought together [as disciples] by material goods. After that, bring them together through the doctrine! It will be for the welfare of living beings!

Addressed to the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara by the dying Buddha Sakyamuni (Kapstein 1992: 86)

THE VIEW FROM ABOVE

If one were travelling from Leh – the regional capital of the Ladakh region of north-west India, on the very border of Himalayan Tibet1 – to Kumbum Monastery in the summertime, traversing the 5000 metre Trans-Sengge-La Pass once most of the snow had melted away, Lingshed village and its surrounding communities would seem to be nestled within a vast cauldron of mountains, criss-crossed with mountain spurs that point down towards the fast flowing waters of the Zangskar River. As one descends from the pass above Lingshed village itself, and passes clockwise around one of its many entrance cairns (chorten, S. stupa), the layout of almost the entire village greets one in a single vista, spread out in deep greens and yellows
across the valley, nestled on ridges and slopes, built up with evident care
around a fan of tumbling meltwater streams that descend from mountain
waterfalls and braid together into a single tributary at the valley floor,
flowing out of the village through the gorge that leads south to the
Zangskar River.

During the winter months, when the high passes of the Zangskar Range
become impassable with snow, this river acts as a vital lifeline between
Lingshed and the surrounding areas of Ladakh and Zangskar: normally
virtually unnavigable, the water's surface freezes solid along much of its
length in temperatures plummeting to −45 °C, transforming the Zangskar
River Gorge into a treacherous but passable ice-road, referred to as the
chadar. Through this route, traders carry winter supplies of yak-butter, tea
and medicines into and out of the snow-bound villages of the region,
sleeping in frozen caves at night, and braving the changeable and often
treacherous surface of the ice by day.

Within Lingshed valley, almost every available spot of land that can be
viably used, is; these marks of human habitation separate the village off
from the comparative desolation of the areas between. Unlike many villages
in Ladakh and Zangskar – which cluster their houses together into lonely
cliff-top citadels – the houses of Lingshed are dotted about on all sides of
the main and subsidiary valleys, interspersed with fields of barley and peas,
fed by intricate canals and miniature streams, distributing carefully
negotiated quantities of precious water to ensure another year's harvest
for the village's 400 inhabitants. The houses are mud-brick constructions
varying in size from the larger khangchen ('great houses') where the young
household head and his or her family live, to the smaller subsidiary
dwellings called khangbu ('offshoot houses'), inhabited by elderly grand-
parents or celibate lay-nuns.

If entering the village from the East, Kumbum Monastery itself is hidden
behind a deceptive curve in the hillside, only becoming visible once the
hour-long trek down the mountainside is almost complete. Once in full
view, however, its physical presence is impressive, draped across a south-
facing mountain slope in long hanging lines of monastic quarters, or shak
(literally, 'pendant') that taper down from the central temple complex at its
peak. In the sharp Himalayan sunlight, the crisp edges of the whitewashed
monastery buildings are broken up by the maroon robes of monks going
about their business, hurrying to prayer in the main temple, studying texts
or entertaining the many laity that visit the monastery. Especially on the
numerous 'holy days' of the year, the corridors and courtyards of the
monastery buzz with life, and monastic quarters are filled with the chatter
of monks' various friends and relatives come to visit, bringing food,
swapping news or requesting rites to be performed in the village. Physically
separated from the village though Kumbum may be, it is hard to overcome
the impression that it remains the social crossroads of the area.
One of the many lower-ranking monasteries of the Gelukpa order of Tibetan Buddhism, Kumbum is neither very large nor very important, especially by comparison with the vast monastic universities that flanked Lhasa in the days of old Tibet, or the new and highly politicised monasteries of the Kagyu and Gelukpa orders that, at the time this account was being written, were becoming the nerve centres of Tibetan Buddhism's growing influence in the post-industrial cultures of Europe, America and East Asia. Lacking a resident incarnate lama to attract wealthy patrons, and disconnected from the hubs of South Asian economic life by high passes traversed only by mule tracks, and bitterly cold, isolating winters, Kumbum and its resident monks nonetheless do their job, serving the agricultural communities that surround it, and continuing a Buddhist tradition of monasticism whose origins can be traced back to the time of Sakyamuni Buddha, four centuries before the birth of Christ.

Although this book will range across a variety of issues - the nature of authority and truth in Tibetan Buddhist ritual, the role of incarnate lamas and the religious, political and legal ideologies that constituted Tibetan systems of statehood - it is also a book about Kumbum monastery and its surrounding villages, and the everyday activities of daily ritual life which dominate the lives of ordinary monks. To understand such local level events, and the processes that brought them into being, we must also look to the larger picture: in contrast to the ethnographic assertions of many early anthropologists and South Asian specialists, it is impossible to understand the village life of places such as Lingshed in isolation from the wider histories and political, social and economic flows that flood over it. Most clearly, it is impossible to understand the kind of religious life practised in Tibetan Buddhist communities such as Lingshed and Kumbum, without looking deep into its own, and Buddhism's, past.

Before looking at that history, a few words of caution are required. One of the central difficulties of writing any anthropological work about Tibetan Buddhist monasticism comes in attempting to encapsulate the sheer volume of history that stands behind its various institutions and traditions. For many 'modern' thinkers - both Tibetan and Western - such histories have two particular manifestations: the 'objective' histories of the archaeologist and secular historian on one hand; and the interpretative histories of Buddhist self-representation on the other. Generally, these two are seen as at odds, with the former acting to progressively deconstruct and disprove the pious and post hoc reconstructions of the latter, unearthing the 'true' history of Buddhism to its (presumably conservative and indignant, but ultimately 'enlightened') proponents. After all, as we shall see in this chapter, the religious history of Buddhism, both at its source in India, and in its later manifestations in Tibet, is replete with tales of magical feats and battles, of miraculous powers and divine interventions, a cacophony of superstitions and improbabilities that are anathema to many modern, rational commentators, Buddhist or otherwise.
From the perspective of the anthropologist, however, the situation is more complex. Whilst the findings of archaeologists and Buddhologists aid in the production of historical accounts of the transformation of institutions, the manner in which Tibetan Buddhists in Lingshed monastery, Lhasa or Dharamsala seek to represent their own history is itself part of that very objective history. Indigenous historical accounts give crucial insights into the manner in which people perceive themselves now as inheritors of such histories, and elaborate the meanings and significances behind crucial activities and ritual actions. As Geshe Ngawang Changchub – head scholar and principal teacher in Kumbum – explained to me once when I expressed some doubt as to the confidence that could be placed in historical claims made by deities when they ‘possessed’ local individuals, the purpose of historical accounts from a Buddhist perspective lay not in their simple factual accuracy, but in their ability to generate faith in Buddhism – something which was, to his mind, of greater benefit than the dry technicalities of ‘objective’ history. In what follows, therefore, I have attempted to balance the kind of historical information agreed on by secular historians, and more ‘legendary’ accounts of historical process. Both, I believe, have a place in any understanding of the present.

THE ORIGINS OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

Within the vast history of Buddhism in Asia, Tibetan Buddhism was a relative late-comer. As the doctrines and practices of Gautama Sakyamuni, the Buddha ('Awakened One') spread from their place of origin in Kosala and Magadha in North India, Buddhism's power and influence flourished with enormous speed, spreading swiftly along the trade routes of Asia in the centuries following his death and paranirvana in 483 AD, influencing and transforming the histories and states of Northern India, East and South East Asia. The deserts and valleys of Tibet, locked within the mountainous walls of the Himalaya, Karakoram and Kunlun mountain-ranges, were by contrast left as an empty hole in the heart of Buddhist-dominated Asia. Even the influence of the vast Kushan (or Mauryan) empire, under the Buddhist Emperor Asoka (r. 270–240 AD), centred on the very doorstep of Tibet's Western flank in modern-day Kashmir, failed to make substantial inroads into the high plateau. The Tibetan regions of the time were barren and politically fragmented wastelands, populated by nomadic herders, brigands and local warlords, whose religious life was dominated by local mountain worship and other earth cults. This heterogeneous indigenous ritual life is now often subsumed under the wider rubric of Bon – centred principally on the priestcraft of local deity worship.

It was not until the middle of the seventh century AD that the military expansion of Central Tibet's Yarlung kingships brought local rulers in the area into political and social contact with its Buddhist neighbours in China.
and Nepal: with that contact, the first institutional footfalls of Buddhism in the high plateau began. Before discussing the history of this crucial 'first transmission' of Buddhism to Tibet, however, it is worth looking in some depth at the kind of Buddhism that developed in Asia in the centuries prior to this event.

Although Tibetan Buddhism, like all other Buddhist traditions - recognise the existence of numerous Buddha figures throughout human history, it is difficult to escape the inevitable concentration of all such schools on the historical and mythological life of the Buddha of this world-age, the 'Lion of the Sakyas', Gautama Sakyamuni. Reborn at the end of many thousands of lifetimes of spiritual striving, the young Sakyamuni renounced the fruits of good karma that had led to rebirth as a prince within a noble royal lineage in what is now south-eastern Nepal, and entered into the ascetic rigours of life as a wandering yogin. Finding little real release from the sufferings of the world after six years of rigorous mortification of the flesh, Sakyamuni embraced the 'Middle Path' (uma, S. Madhyamaka) between asceticism and indulgence and, after an extended meditative battle with Mara the demonic Lord of Illusion, attained Enlightenment under the Bo Tree in Bodhgaya.

Following his attainment of Enlightenment, Sakyamuni, the Buddha (or 'Awakened One'), entered upon a lifetime of teaching, creating around him a monastic order [So sangha]. Initially centred on a core group of celibate wandering disciples [So bhikkhu], the Buddha began the process of carving out a full monastic code - laws and precepts with two aims in mind: firstly, to regulate the life of the sangha as an institutional unit; and secondly, to secure the bhikkhu's renunciation of worldly life, thus allowing him to attain enlightenment in the footsteps of Sakyamuni himself.

The religious path prescribed within the early Buddhist movement inherited many of the soteriological concepts prevalent in India at the time. Familiar Buddhist notions of samsara (the ordinary condition of suffering), nirvana (release from suffering) and karma (the law of cause and effect linking moral and ritual action to subsequent life conditions, particularly those following rebirth) represented very much the common vocabulary of religious striving amongst the many nascent sects and movements at the time - a conceptual inheritance of the previously-dominant Brahmanical and Vedic ritual traditions (Gombrich 1996). More specific to the Buddha's message, however, was the founding of a distinct monastic order, or sangha - a collective of monks, or bhikkhu, that was authorised to study, teach and preserve the Buddhist teachings.

During this early period, the wandering nature of the Buddhist monk's life was set within the monastic code, or Vinaya. At the heart of the Vinaya was the Pratimoksa, the monks' vows, Together, these circumscribed a life based on morality, study and meditation. The Vinaya particularly outlined monks' relations with laity, which were dominated by the notion of dana,
The Face of Monasticism

or religious sponsorship, in which monks receive alms from householders as they travelled the countryside.

This eremitic lifestyle was initially only broken for the duration of the so-called Rainy Season Retreat, when the sangha would retire to caves for the period of the monsoon. These retreat sites developed a splendour and focus of their own, with particular communities of monks becoming regular residents there, and developing increasingly settled alms relationships with nearby villages. In time, the caves became the site for the creation of an increasingly settled or coenobitic sangha, with monastic communities growing in dependence on specific and settled groups of lay sponsors. Whilst the bhikku's renunciation of 'the world' remained, the specifics of the social world that he renounced became increasingly fixed.

Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana

In the centuries following the death and final Enlightenment [S. paranirvana] of the Buddha, Buddhism grew in size and influence, spreading North to present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan, and South and East to Sri Lanka and Burma. Under the patronage of powerful kings such as the Emperor Asoka (r. 286–239 AD), Buddhism began to secure an enduring ideological relationship with the state, consolidating notions of righteous rule and the virtuous king [S. dharmaraja] which would culminate in the rule of the Dalai Lamas in later Tibet.

The rapid spread of Buddhism across Asia was also attended by a growing division of the Buddhist sangha into a variety of traditions, each with their own version of the Buddha's teaching and view of the correct manner of interpreting it (Harvey 1990: 85–94). According to Buddhist histories, eighteen such schools emerged, out of which only a few are now understood in any great detail. The differences between these schools largely attended upon questions of fundamental philosophy and points of controversy in the monastic code – issues which are accounted for in the various Buddhist traditions by reference to the dictates of historical and semi-historical Buddhist councils [S. sangiti, or 'recitals']. The first of these (whose very existence is disputed by many scholars) is said to have occurred at Rajagaha immediately after the Buddha's death (Vin.II: 284–7), and was called to fully compose the monastic Vinaya and the Buddha's dharma as authoritative oral traditions. This was followed by a second (and historically more locatable) council at Vesali (Vin.II: 294–307), around a century later, which centred on a dispute between a figure by the name of Yasa, and a set of monks from Vajji over the precise question of monks ownership of specific property, and the relaxation of prohibitions on monks' eating in the afternoon. Minor though these changes may appear to be, they were roundly condemned by the council, and arguably foreshadowed the future division of the sangha into what would become the Theravada and Mahayana
Traditions. According to Theravadin accounts, this distinction was solidified during a third council, which was called by the Buddhist Emperor Asoka and took place on the Lower Ganges, in which issues such as the reality of future and past lives and states of consciousness were hotly debated. The debate caused a schism between the Sarvastavadin and Vibhajyavadin schools (the latter often associated with early Theravada), which in turn led to the Sarvastavadins departing to Mathura in the Northwest.

It was not, however, until the first millennium AD that these various schools, fraternities and schisms began to coalesce into forms identifiable today. In particular, what is now known as the Mahayana, or Great Vehicle, developed out of a loose conglomerate of schools, all of whom had asserted a substantial emphasis on the bodhisatta path – an elaboration of the precise requirements for attaining enlightenment – and on the transcendence of the Buddhas as a semi-divine figure. Finally, the Mahayana was characterised by a particular philosophical outlook, one developed from the early Abhidharma literature, but which re-wrought its emphasis on the absence of a perduring self [S. atman] as generalised critique of all notions of inherent existence.

The development of the Mahayana in northern India centred in particular on the ‘Middle Way’ school of the philosopher Nagarjuna (c. 150 AD–250 AD). This philosophy developed the early Buddhist notion of ‘non-self’ [S. anatman] into a fully-fledged ontology of ‘emptiness’ which denied the inherent existence of any object of mental attention (see Chapter Four). Nagarjuna’s understanding of the emptiness [S. sunyata] of phenomena implied an important and in Buddhist terms relatively radical step: because the perfect understanding of the emptiness of all phenomena itself implied the attainment of liberation from attachment and aversion to those very phenomena, then to understand the true nature of samsaric phenomena (i.e. their ‘emptiness’) was to attain nirvana. Thus the nature of samsara and nirvana were, from an enlightened perspective, indistinguishable. This was radical for Buddhists because it meant that the state of nirvana in which Buddhas reside was no longer conceived to exist at some vast gulf from the samsaric world of ordinary beings. Whilst Buddhahood still implied transcendent of attachment for the world, it was also seen as a seamless part of that world.

This Mahayana view led to several further developments in the ‘presentation’ of Buddhahood. The first was seen in the rise of the notion of ‘instantaneous enlightenment’ such as is found in the present Zen schools of Buddhism – where the ‘availability’ of Buddhahood as a reality became a possibility arising from a radical overthrow of conventional means of thought. The second was the proliferation, especially in the Indian subcontinent, of various Buddhas whose form represented a possible ‘face’ of Buddhahood in the world. The most classic version of this is the five dhyani (or ‘concentration’) Buddhas – Vairocana, Amitabha, Ratnasamb-
hava, Amogasiddhi and Amitayus – whose differing forms were transposed from classic poses within the life story of Sakyamuni into a mandala of five Buddhas, with Vairocana at the centre and the others at each of the cardinal directions, a thematic motif which acted as a template for the later development of further ‘Buddha families’ (Snellgrove 1987: 189–213).

The introduction of mandalic portrayals of Buddhahood is significant because of the degree to which it shows how, at the dawn of the Christian era, Mahayana specialists were beginning to examine the possibilities inherent in the notion of the production and presentation of Buddhahood in a controlled ritual environment. As the first millennium progressed, this was to develop into the highly elaborate mode of ritualised Buddhism which Tibet itself would be heir to: Vajrayana or tantric Buddhism.

Often referred to as the ‘Diamond Vehicle’ [S. Vajrayana] or ‘Mantra Vehicle’ [S. mantrayana] of Buddhism, tantra revolves around the use of divine realities as a vehicle, both for the attainment or ‘realisation’ [S. siddha] of enlightenment and for the evocation of supernormal ritual powers. Here again, the radical undermining of conventional modes of thought and morality was explored, as a route to ‘bursting through’ into an ultimate reality: in tantra, this occasionally involved radical practices such as sexual yoga, the ‘transformation’ and offering of impure substances such as blood and faeces to Buddhas, and so forth. Derived from the cultural milieu of early first millennium Saivite asceticism, tantric practices began entering Mahayana Buddhism between the third and ninth centuries AD, attaining mainstream status several centuries prior to the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet (Sanderson 1991; Snellgrove 1987).

As a result, the Vajrayana constituted a large section of the Buddhist practices that were first translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan, making a foothold in Tibetan areas between the seventh and eleventh centuries. Not only did the Vajrayana and Mahayana represent the form of Buddhism that emerged in Tibet, but also influenced how that emergence was subsequently perceived – not simply as the transmission of a certain ethico-ritual tradition to the high plateau, but as the progressive unfolding of the Buddha’s proselytising plan, prophesied on his deathbed, and carried through via a series of divine manifestations, a view very much in line with Vajrayana perceptions of reality (Kapstein 1992).

TANTRA AND STATE IN TIBETAN HISTORY

According to the pious histories of Tibet, the arrival of Buddhism was a staggered achievement, taking place across several centuries. A highly influential fourteenth century ritual text, the *Mani Kabum*, describes this process in terms of the compassionate intervention of the Buddha-cum-bodhisattva Chenresig [S. Avalokitesvara], a celestial deity and manifestation of the Buddha Amitabha, who was charged by Sakyamuni himself with
overseeing the growth of the Buddhist religion in what was then the unpopulated wastelands to the North of India (see quotation at beginning of chapter). To fulfil Sakyamuni's edict, the Mani Kabum records how Chenresig first manifested himself as a pious monkey who, out of compassion, emerged from meditation in his mountain cave to mate with an indigenous rock-demoness (Kapstein 1992). The product of their union was the Tibetan race, whose ambiguous parentage is often used to account for their own dual nature – both violent and passionately religious (Samuel 1993: 119).

In various forms, Chenresig is then said to have chaperoned the nascent Tibetan race, giving them the nine forms of grain to survive by until they were mature enough to understand the Buddhist doctrine. This came in several forms, often misunderstood by the dual-natured Tibetans. Firstly, a series of religious artefacts and texts were said to have fallen from the sky onto the palace roof of the early Tibetan kings as they rose to power in the Yarlung Valley in south-east Tibet. These, however, were beyond their comprehension, and remained unused, although venerated. The Mani Kabum then describes how the aggressive tendencies of the Yarlung Kings brought their forces into contact with China to the West, and Nepal to the South, during the seventh century. King Srongtsen Gampo – depicted as the first in a line of human manifestations of Chenresig in Tibet – was offered by way of conciliation a bride each from the courts of T'ang China and Kathmandu. The Chinese Princess, Wengchen Kongjo, travelling over the western mountains of China in c. 650 AD, brought with her a statue of the Buddha Sakyamuni called the Jobo ('Lord').

But the new arrival did not come unopposed: the statue's chariot, upon arriving in the Tibetan capital, began to sink into the ground, and could not be released. Kong Jo, however, was well versed in geomancy, and consulted a geomantic chart given to her as a parting gift by her father, in order to discover the nature of the obstruction. She found that the land of Tibet was a maelstrom of negative geomantic elements, arranged like a she-demoness lying on her back, thrashing her arms and legs to repel the new arrival. Particularly, the Plain of Milk where the capital city lay was the palace of the king of the lu water spirits, and the lake at its centre was the heart-blood of the demoness. Such malignant forces, she determined, accounted for 'the evil behaviour [of the Tibetans] including brigandage' (Aris 1980: 13).

To counteract these negative influences, the Chinese Princess advised Srongtsen Gampo to build a series of twelve temples on the various me-tsa ('fire veins' a term borrowed from the medical term for moxibustion points in Tibetan acupuncture) of the Tibetan landscape in three huge concentric squares crossing the entirety of central Tibet, with each temple constructed around a 'nail' designed to bind down respectively the hips, shoulders, knees, elbows, hands and feet of the demoness (Stein 1972: 38–9). These were the necessary preliminaries to finally filling in the lake near Lhasa and
building the new Jokhang shrine – which was to house the Buddha-statue – on top of it.

But Srongtsen Gampo initially mistook Kongjo’s advice, attempting instead to build the Jokhang straight away. Whatever he and the Nepalese Queen built in the day, however, the enraged local spirits tore down in the night (Aris 1980: 14–15). Finally understanding Kongjo’s plan, the king built everything according to her instructions, thus suppressing the lu and transfixing the chthonic spirits of Tibet. This suppression of the land allowed its many auspicious qualities to come to the fore, encouraging the religious tendencies of the otherwise savage Tibetan race.5

Following on from Srongtsen Gampo, the history of the first diffusion of Buddhism to Tibet is very much a state history, a story of kings. The degree to which such histories reflect a general transformation of society as a whole is a crucial point, and there is nothing to say that the religion of the king either is or should be that of his subjects. Nor should the Tibetans’ transformation to piety, resulting from Srongtsen Gampo’s actions, be interpreted as even implying a general conversion to Buddhism; as we shall see in later chapters, such transformations feed into an altogether subtler discourse about religious identity. This discourse is often crystallised in subsequent Buddhist accounts as a battle between the growing allegiance to Buddhism, on the one hand, and to Bon, the pre-Buddhist worship of local deities, on the other. The ‘conservative’ forces of Bon priesthood appear to have organised themselves around households, localities and kingships, and represented a potent force to be ‘domesticated’ by the growing power of Buddhism.

Of course, the portrayal of figures such as Srongtsen Gampo as particularly pious or even Buddhist figures is itself also problematic; indeed, there is much to say that Srongtsen Gampo was merely one warlord amongst many, whose concession to his new wives’ religion was more political than heartfelt. From an anthropological point of view, though, such questions are moot at best – it is, after all, not the historical reality of such myths and their characters that is at stake, but the role they play in giving meaning and context to the practice of Buddhism in Tibetan regions today. Nonetheless, these stories themselves point to the highly political nature of the king’s religion, and the degree to which that faith was a contested issue.

Srongtsen Gampo was one of the three principal chosgyal, or Religion Kings, of the first diffusion, and was followed a century later by the equally extraordinary figure of Trisong I Detsen (b. 742). Much of Trisong I Detsan’s life is discussed in the widely-read Padma Kut’ang, the Tibetan namt’ar (or ‘history of liberation’) of the tantric yogin Guru Rinpoche, a semi-mythic figure often credited with finally converting Tibet to Buddhism. In his attempts to secure Buddhism in Tibet, Trisong I Detsen ordered the founding of Tibet’s first monastery at Samye near Lhasa.6 Initially, the king
himself oversaw the building work, but was met with resistance: what the king's builders erected in the day, earthquakes destroyed the following night. Consulting his astrologers, the king was told that the local spirits of Tibet were inimical to the new monastery, and thus would destroy whatever was built. Unable to continue, the king asked his advisers what should be done. They recommended inviting the bodhisattva-abbot Santaraksita, a respected monk and religious scholar from India, to oversee the building work. But even Santaraksita's efforts met with failure, as the local gods continued to destroy whatever was built. Finally, Santaraksita declared that it was beyond his capabilities, and that only the powers of a tantric master such as the renowned Guru Rinpoche could overcome such obstacles.

Guru Rinpoche - a married Buddhist yogin and exorcist from the Swat Valley in Southern Afghanistan, depicted in many subsequent texts as the Second Buddha and a further manifestation of Chenresig - accepted the call, and began his journey across the Himalaya to Samye. Using his tantric powers, the exorcist travelled throughout Tibet, challenging the local gods and spirits of each region to magical battle. Systematically, he brought the local gods of each region to their knees, threatening them with destruction, and binding them to renounce their previous demands for human and blood sacrifice, and to accept and protect Buddhism instead. By the time he arrived at Samye, the whole of Tibet was subjugated to Buddhism. Guru Rinpoche then performed a dance, called a cham, at the site of the future monastery, using his esoteric powers to summon up all the divine local powers he had mastered, not simply to protect the monastery from them, but also to invoke their protection of the new institution. From that point, the Padma Kat'ang records, the building of the monastery continued unhindered.

Despite the exalted place that subsequent Buddhist historians have given to chosgyal such as Srongtsen Gampo and Trisong Detsen in the overall spread of Buddhism, the stories of both figures amply portray the powerful cultural understanding of Tibetan personhood as dual and ambiguous - the pious monkey ancestor and his demonic consort locked in endless struggle and embrace. Even within the Padma Kat'ang, Trisong Detsen's royal position is clearly but ambiguously situated between the competing powers of Buddhism and Bon in Tibet, emphasising his own discomfort and vacillation as he tries to satisfy both sides:

I have wanted to establish these Tibetan lands in religion (chos)
And much has been achieved in the way of images and temples,
But as for obtaining scriptures and translations of religious works,
Although I have found them and sent the wise and intelligent ones to
India where they find excellent scriptures,
The ministers who are well disposed to Bon are jealous of this religion.
They refuse it their approval and so I have had to dismiss it.
Whether one may consider Bon a religion or not, I have thought that it
should be translated.
I have summoned a sage (gShen-bon) from the land of Zhang-zhung,
and so put Thang-nag bon-po with the sage Sha-ri dBu-chen.
They have translated the four-volume Klu-'bum in the Avalokitesvara
Temple.
So now it is said that I am propagating the Bon teachings.
It is said that my tomb should be built at Mu-ri of Dom-mkhar since
such tombs are a Bon custom,
So I have ordered my Bon ministers to build this tomb.
It is said that I should build a stupa on the hill (named) Crest-nose,
since such stupas are a religious custom,
So I have ordered my religious ministers to build one.

(Snellgrove 1987: 402–3)

Indeed, it is clear from the subsequent histories of Tibet that, while
Buddhism may have superseded Bon as the ‘state religion’ of Tibet, Bon was
far from vanquished as an institutional reality. Thus, Ralpacan, the third of
the chosgyal – a weak and other-worldly Buddhist ruler who is said to have
scandalised the Tibetan court by allowing members of the sangha to sit on
his outstretched hair as a sign of his faith – is also said to have been
assassinated by his brother Glandharma, in 839. Glandharma sought to re-
establish Bon, and his persecution of Buddhism led to his own assassination
at the hands of the Buddhist monk Palgyi Dorje – who slew Glandharma
with a single arrow after disguising himself as a black-hatted Bon ‘devil-
dancer’ – in 842.

The tales of Srongtsen Gampo, Trisong IDetsen and Guru Rinpoche are
commonly told throughout the Tibetan cultural area, and their role as
mythic histories of state is fairly self-evident. Certainly, the probable origins
of such elaborate magical stories in the centuries post-dating the events
described makes them pious reconstructions rather than dependable history.
Nonetheless, they constitute a central plank in a series of understandings –
about Buddhism’s institutional presence, and the ubiquitous and ever-
present influence of chthonic forces on the character of Tibetans as people –
whose position in the cultural and religious imaginations of Tibetans
cannot be doubted. Even in Ladakh and Zangskar, which traditionally
maintained a certain independence from Tibet, similar myths of state speak
to a common sense of origin. The chronicles of Ladakh trace the ancestry of
the Ladaki kings back to Srongtsen Gampo and the Yarlung Valley
(Rabgias 1984); similarly, the Bo-Yig land grants documents held at
Kumbum’s sister monastery of P’ukt’al in Zangskar declare:

In this Zangskar valley which is full of wealth and happiness … came
Padmasambhava [Guru Rinpoche] who gained control over the non-
human spirits and put down the bad features of the area. The valley is shaped like a female demon lying on its back; so he built [the temple] Kanika on its head. His statue was made on its heart at Pipiting and on the feet of the demon he built a shrine in a garden of the Future Buddha Maitreya. Padmasambhava prophesied that Zangskar would be like the happy cemetery at Sukhavati (i.e. a beneficial place for meditation) in India. (Crook 1994b: 435). Thus, the story of Zangskar's formation as a Buddhist land contains many aspects from both Tibetan state histories: both the 'nailing down' of the (demonic) landscape, and the intervention of the great tantric yogin as a preparation for successful Buddhist religiosity. Particularly, the magical suppression of the land itself, to make way for the shrines of Buddhist heroes, is an iconic past repeated again and again. In Lingshed itself, in the southernmost flank of the valley, villagers indicate proudly the pressed handprint of Guru Rinpoche himself, made during his momentous battle with the local spirits of Tibet.

At the same time, such spirits, and the practices and ideologies that surround them, have never gone away, simply because they exist in uneasy acquiescence to institutional Buddhism. Lingshed alone, as we shall see in greater detail in later chapters, is dotted with shrines to its seven principal local area gods, whilst all houses have their own household deities, mountains their mountain gods, and the fields and stream sources harbour the capricious but essential lu, water-spirits that ensure fertility both to fields and people. As with other Tibetan cultural areas, all of these chthonic numina, or zhidag, still make up the living world of most Buddhists in Lingshed village, and as such must be addressed in some way, shape or form by the monks of Lingshed monastery.

The initial arrival of Buddhism in Tibetan regions is thus conceived of in Tibetan Buddhist histories as a process by which the abilities of particular tantric masters to manifest Buddhahood are brought into contact with powerful chthonic forces in Tibet. These forces are then subdued and incarcerated, to exist in a complex (but never fully complete) hierarchy of ritual power that underlies the ideological existence of state Buddhism in Tibet. In turn, this 'balance of power' is conceptualised in terms of Tibetans' struggle between the twin sides of their nature. In a sense, this matrix of ritual power and chthonic personhood is what this book is about, and how the complex and often implicit understanding of it plays out in the village, monastic and state life of 20th and 21st century Tibetan Buddhist societies.

However, such mythic tales also exist alongside the more prosaic institutional history of Buddhism in the Himalaya. In particular, the legendary events surrounding the three Religion Kings play over a period of time in which a whole plethora of tantric traditions of more or less Buddhist
content were seeping across the Tibetan plateau, often in the form of household and village ritual lineages which, following Ralpacan and Glandharma's assassinations and the subsequent scattering of the Yarlung Dynasty, had little or no institutional centre by the end of the ninth century AD. In the vacuum that followed, the stage was set for a second diffusion of Buddhism to Tibet.

By the early tenth century, the kingly centre of Tibetan politics shifted to the West. Under the influence of monastic Buddhism in Kashmir, the monk-king Yeshe-'Od rose to power, and sought to both purify and regenerate Buddhist practice in Tibet. Railing against what he perceived to be the over-indulgence by many village tantrists in tantric ritual's more 'lurid' aspects, he issued the following royal proclamation:

You tantric specialists, who live in our villages,
Have no connection with the Three Ways of Buddhism,
And yet claim to follow the Mahayana.
Without keeping the moral rules of the Mahayana
You say 'We are Mahayanists.'
This is like a beggar saying that he is a king
Or a donkey dressed in the skin of a lion . . .
O village specialists, your tantric kind of practice,
If heard of in other lands would be a cause for shame.
You say you are Buddhists, but your conduct
Shows less compassion than an ogre.
You are more greedy for meat than a hawk or a wolf.
You are more subject to lust than a donkey or an ox on heat.
You are more intent on rotten remains than ants in a tumbledown house.
You have less concept of purity than a dog or a pig.
To pure divinities you offer faeces and urine, semen and blood.
Alas! With worship such as this, you will be reborn in a mire of rotten corpses.
You thus reject the religion of our Threefold Scriptures.
Alas! You will indeed be reborn in the Avici Hell.
As retribution for killing creatures in your so-called 'rites of deliverance',
Alas! You will surely be reborn as a uterine worm.
You worship the Three Jewels with flesh, blood and urine.
In ignorance of 'enigmatic' terminology you perform the rite literally.
A Mahayanist such as this will surely be born as a demon.
It is truly amazing that a Buddhist should act in this way.
If practices such as your result in Buddhahood,
Then hunters, fishermen, butchers and prostitutes
Would all surely have gained enlightenment by now.
Yeshe-'Od then inaugurated a new period of Buddhist proselytising to Western Tibet. In this latter diffusion, seminal religious figures such as the ‘translators’ (lotsava) Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055) and Marpa (1012–96), and the hugely influential Indian monk-scholar Atisa (982–1054), made their initial presence on the Tibetan scene felt in the regions of Western Tibet, Ladakh and Zangskar. The influence of Rinchen Zangpo was felt in Lingshed, where the oldest shrine (the tsang-khang or ‘secret room’) in the monastery contains depictions of the translator, of a similar style to those of the 12th Century Lotsava Shrine at the Alchi Choskhor temple complex in the Ladakh Valley (see Snellgrove and Skorupski 1979).

Consequently, the Tibetan adoption of tantra was neither homogenous nor uncontested. Most importantly, the various tantric traditions that were imported into Tibet did not at that time represent a single coherent whole, but rather a diffuse and unrationalised set of ritual corpuses deriving from both first and second diffusions. Their contents contained many mutual inconsistencies, and, as we have seen, occasionally recommended ritual practices which seemed (to a literal reading) to be at odds with conventional Buddhist disciplines and ethics. In particular, key differences existed in the nature of the translated corpus between the first and second diffusions of Buddhism to Tibet, the so called Nyingmapa and Sarma (Old and New) traditions. 9

In the centuries that followed these diffusions, various schools emerged which synthesised the relationship between tantric and non-tantric elements into different ritual and institutional traditions. One of the most crucial axes for this variation was this very problematic relationship between the more traditional Buddhist emphasis on conventional ethical discipline – and indeed on the institutions of celibate monasticism – and those tantric disciplines which exhorted practitioners towards the use of sexual yoga, the offering of polluted substances and the relinquishing of ‘limiting’ ethical norms, as the basis of a final transcendent enlightenment. In particular, the interpretation – literal versus symbolic – of tantric disciplines within institutional Buddhism was (and remains) highly controversial, with different teachers and schools emphasising and systematising different elements. Whilst almost all Tibetan syntheses found a place for some combination of tantra, ethical trainings and monasticism, schools such as the Nyingmapa, Kagyu and Sakyapa placed a high total value on tantric trainings, with monasticism being an important, but optional, element of the spiritual path, whilst other schools (most particularly the Kadampa, founded by Atisa), presented monasticism as a totalising context for tantric training.

The Rise of the Gelukpa Order

The inspired religious fervour of the second diffusion was not to last, entering instead an era where the pursuit of political power dominated both
The Face of Monasticism

Buddhism's form and content in Tibetan regions. As the various strands of Tibetan Buddhism coalesced around the teachings of many of the religious preceptors of the second diffusion, the various political powers within Tibet were forced (in 1207) to submit to the overwhelming might of Genghis Khan's Mongol armies as they moved west towards an unsuspecting Europe. Having thus adeptly avoided political annihilation, a growing struggle for the patronage of the Mongol Khans began to rock the newly-formed religious establishments of Tibet. In particular, it exacerbated existing feuds between the various religious centres, in particular between the Sakya and Drigung Kagyu schools, resulting in the eventual razing to the ground of the great Drigung Monastery in 1290, and the death of many of its fighting monks (Snellgrove and Richardson 1986: 152).

It was amidst this tense political climate that the Gelukpa [dge.lugs.pa – 'virtuous method'] order, of which Kumbum monastery is a part, came into being. One of the last of the self-contained orders to appear on the Tibetan scene, and in many senses the first truly indigenous Tibetan school of Buddhism, the Gelukpa were founded in the 14th century by the scholar-monk Tsongkhapa (1357-1419). The order – which emphasised monasticism as the essential determinant of religious authority, alongside the extremely controlled use of tantra – saw itself as the inheritor of Atisa's increasingly moribund Kadampa order, and originally made a name for itself through its strict discipline and arbitration of land disputes between other orders and land-owners. It spread rapidly from its original monastery at Ganden (founded 1409) near Lhasa, to become a widespread and politically powerful institution that had 'brought over' monasteries throughout Tibet and surrounding regions.

As part of the expansion of Gelukpa power, a variety of institutions in Ladakh and Zangskar (such as Karsha and P'ukt'al monasteries) were converted to the Gelukpa during the 1440s by Tsongkhapa's disciple, Changsems Sherabs Zangpo (Crook 1994b; Petech 1977: 168n; Snellgrove and Skorupski 1980: 42; Vitali 1996). Amongst his numerous acts was the founding of the Tashi Od'Bar ('Auspicious Shining Light') Shrine at Lingshed, presently at the heart of Kumbum's temple complex. One of the oldest of the Kumbum monks related the event:

It is said that Changsems Shesrabs Zangpo was coming over the Hanumala Pass [to the south of Lingshed, en route to Zangskar]. As he came over the pass, he saw a tantric symbol shining brightly on a rock. So he said 'I shall build a lhakhang [temple] there.' The rock was placed inside a changchub-chorten [a stupa depicting the Buddha's enlightenment], and the Tashi Od'Bar shrine was built around it.10

Eventually, the alliance of Mongol military power with the Gelukpa order led to their total political ascendancy in central Tibet under the leadership of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1681) and Gushri Khan. This in turn led to a
complete rearrangement of most of the religious establishments in Tibet. Ganden, along with the monastic universities of Sera and Drepung, became one of the three major ‘seats’ of Gelukpa power in Tibet, surrounding the capital Lhasa in a triumvirate of ecclesiastical dominance. The Kagyu schools – who had latterly presented the major challenge to Gelukpa power in a protracted war over Central Tibet – had vast tracts of land confiscated and monasteries closed. As a result, Tibetan relations with the kingdoms of Ladakh-Zangskar and Bhutan – both of whose kings supported the Kagyu, and had been accused of persecuting Gelukpa establishments – soured, precipitating war (Petech 1977).

Lasting from 1681 to 1683, the war was to prove the demise of Ladakh as a truly independent kingdom: desperate to oust the Tibetan and Mongolian forces that had swept into the area, the King of Ladakh threw in his lot with the Moghuls of Kashmir, who returned him to his throne in Leh, but only if he consented to making Ladakh a vassal state of Kashmir (Petech 1977: 70 – 75). Ladakh became politically and economically crippled, and vacillated between the religious control of the Gelukpa order and the economic power of Kashmir. In the end it was left compromised in both directions, facing punitive economic levies from Kashmir, and the major re-orientation of its internal ecclesiastical and monastic structure in favour of Gelukpa dominance from Lhasa. Monasteries of all orders were placed under the Gelukpa seat at Drepung, and all the Gelukpa monasteries there within the control of Gyuto, the tantric college at Sera monastery outside Lhasa. It is arguable to what extent the other orders took this seriously, but the specifics of this centralisation of Gelukpa institutions remain to this day.

As the economic stability of Ladakh gradually returned, so did the powers of local kings. Ladakh and Zangskar were unified again under the kingship of Tsewang Namgyal in the late 1700s. In 1779, he donated many of the Gelukpa monasteries in Ladakh and Zangskar to the visiting Gelukpa luminary, Lobzang Geleg Yeshe Dragpa, the 8th Ngari Rinpoche incarnation, from Western Tibet. This included the monasteries and villages of Karsha, P’ukt’al, Likir and Mune (Petech 1977: 112 – see Figure 2). He also donated the region of Rangdum, and granted tax exemption to the assigned areas. Following this, in 1783, Ngari Rinpoche founded Rangdum monastery, the eventual ‘mother monastery’ (ma-gon) of the group. Although not explicit, it is highly probable that Kumbum and the villages around Lingshed were included as part of this grant, as a subsidiary of one of the others, possibly Karsha or P’ukt’al. As with many religious events at the time, Tsewang Namgyal’s gift contained an edge of politics to it. Whilst there is little historical evidence for such a motive, some Ladakhis refer to Rangdum as a khag-gnon (lit. ‘means of subjugation’), a ‘peg’ built through the allegiance of Ngari Rinpoche and King Tsewang Namgyal, designed to seal the valley of Zangskar as a Buddhist realm, protected from the encroachment of Muslim influence from Kashmir.
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The power of the kings of Ladakh was soon to wane once more, as Kashmir sought to reclaim its prize. In the 1840s, a series of minor wars perpetrated by the Dogras of Jammu annexed Ladakh and brought it under the sway of the Maharaja of Kashmir and, indirectly, British rule. The kingships were abolished except as titular posts and Dogra forts were built in Ladakh and Zangskar. Rule from Kashmir was comparatively benign, and the growing colonial influence of *pax britannica* in the region saved the monasteries from many of the ravages that Buddhist areas had suffered under Muslim reigns. Ecclesiastical connections with Tibet continued uninterrupted, and the new status of Ladakh went unquestioned by a Tibetan government and Gelukpa order that had become increasingly inward-looking and unwilling to enforce its political will at its borders (Snellgrove and Richardson 1986: 224–230). Monks from Ladakh and Zangskar continued to travel to the monastic universities of central Tibet, whilst interference from Kashmir was minimised by the long three-week journey across the Himalayas. This situation continued until the 1950s, when the forces of the People's Liberation Army entered Tibet from China. Chinese influence in Tibetan affairs increased steadily over the next nine years, until the ill-fated Tibetan Uprising in 1959 precipitated a bloody Chinese military crackdown, and the 14th Dalai Lama's flight into exile in India (Shakya 1999).

Meanwhile, Kashmir itself, as one of the princely states of India, found itself increasingly torn between the newly founded and independent nation-states of India and Pakistan. By the 1960s and 1970s, Ladakh and Zangskar became the fulcrum of the conflicting territorial ambitions of India, China and Pakistan. The Chinese annexation of a large part of Ladakh in 1962, and the various Indo-Pakistan wars and skirmishes have led to India's substantial development of its 'previously backward' northern province, along with its no less significant militarisation. In 1975, foreign tourism to the region began, criss-crossing the region with cultural and economic flows previously unfelt.

**Influence from the South**

Lingshed and its monastery remained at a distance from such processes, although the area became one of the more favoured routes for Western long-distance trekking. More importantly for Kumbum monastery, the development of the surrounding region brought it and Lingshed into the widening political influence of newly born Tibetan exile politics, re-linking the monastery to the refugee monasteries of Drepung and Gyuto, now reincarnated in southern India under the purview of the 14th Dalai Lama's Government-in-Exile.

In 1980, and periodically thereafter, the 14th Dalai Lama began visiting and giving teachings in Ladakh and the Zangskar Valley, representing the
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high point of a steady stream of important Tibetan Buddhist figures visiting Ladakh. The re-establishment of the Three Seats as effective teaching colleges in India meant that the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy could turn its attention to the previously peripheral Buddhist communities of the Himalaya, of which north-west India was a point of particular concern. In the early 1990s, the Lingshed area began to benefit from the particular attentions of a high Buddhist scholar, the geshe-lharampa Ngawang Changchub. Having spent 23 years in study at Gomang College at Drepung monastic university (see page 238), Geshe Changchub turned his attentions to what he felt was the unfortunate spiritual and economic condition of his natal area. As one of the most important figures in Lingshed during my stay there, his own description of this period, taken from a small autobiographical text used for sponsorship purposes, follows:

In the Summer of 1991, I returned to my native district of Ladakh. I was sad to see that there really had been no development during the past 23 years in respect of opportunities for livelihood or education. I resolved there and then to do something to alleviate the hardships experienced by the people of the Lingshed area. The best course of action would be to raise the standards of the monastic and secular education and thus I began by engaging in a program of teachings to the monks of Lingshed Monastery. I was very pleased with the level of interest shown and when they requested me to return again the following summer I was glad to accept.

The next year a teaching tour of remote small villages in Zangskar was organised by the Zangskar Buddhist Association and a Zangskar youth organisation. Together with three other scholars from Gomang I visited more than 100 villages over three months. The tour was a great success and I was again extremely pleased by the response shown by the people.

I returned again to Lingshed where I had discussions with local monastic and lay community leaders. A strong need was felt for some sort of development program focused initially on the small schools of the Lingshed area.

On October 17th 1992, I had an audience with His Holiness to report on and receive advice concerning the state of Buddhism in the north-western Himalaya Region. He suggested that I teach mainly Graduated Path (lam-rim) and Mind Training (lozhong) techniques as these were the most suitable for short periods of instruction during the summer months at Lingshed. He also advised me to maintain and strengthen my relationship with the people of Lingshed and surrounding areas. During the audience I felt a deep inspiration such as I had not experienced before and I felt confident about implementing his advice regardless of whatever difficulties there may be.
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In accordance with His Holiness’s instructions, I spent four months in the Lingshed area during the Summer of 1993 giving teachings to the monks of Lingshed monastery and to lay people from the villages of the area. From the 2nd to the 8th August I organised a Seminar focusing mainly on Buddhist Sutra and Tantric teachings but also including two hours a day for people to air their views on the current problems in the area and how they might best be solved. The seminar was well attended by many people from different parts of Ladakh and Zangskar as well as a number of foreign tourists.

On the 16th of December 1993, during his visit to South India, I had another opportunity to meet His Holiness as part of a group from Bangalore with whom I was connected. The main reason for the audience was to get advice on establishing a Dharma centre in Bangalore and how Buddhism might best be taught there. His Holiness advised me to teach whatever methods brought peace to people’s minds and meaning to their lives. I was able to report on the success that we had in improving the schools in the Lingshed area and a general increase in the level of interest in Buddhism. This audience, like the previous one in 1992, instilled me with strong confidence and hope that in future, I would be able to accomplish His Holiness’s wishes.

Whilst delegations have been sent to Dharamsala to request a visit from His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Lingshed and the Trans-Sengge-La Area, the physical obstacles to travel there have, at the time of writing, proven insuperable. Nonetheless, Geshe Changchub has successfully used his influence to persuade the Gelukpa incarnate lama Dagon Rinpoche to spend three summers in the Lingshed area from 1991 onwards, giving teachings and tantric empowerments, as part of his general visits to Zangskar. Combined with this, Geshe Changchub and a series of younger monks at the monastery worked assiduously at procuring financial sponsors from the many trekking and ‘meditation’ tours and individual Western Buddhists that have begun to stay at Lingshed during the summer trekking period. The economic input arising from this has provided opportunities to finance the building of a nunnery in the area, the support of certain forms of local medicine, and the possibility of sponsoring young monks to go to Southern India to receive full monastic training.

CONCLUSION

The introduction and consolidation of Mahayana (t'egpa-chenpo) and Vajrayana (dorje-t'egpa) Buddhism into Tibet and surrounding Himalayan regions eventually produced a set of religious forms and institutions which were, in many ways, unique in Asia. The complex interface between
indigenous religious forms, clerical and tantric forms of Buddhism, combined with a later political situation under Mongol and Chinese intervention which served to suppress the rise of local secular kingships, to produce an institutionalised dominance of Buddhism in Tibet which went unmatched throughout the religion's long history. This dominance had several features, each of which I would like to examine throughout the course of this book:

- The development of a form of mass monasticism which channelled and utilised large sections of both the region’s economy and its populace, with as much as 10–20% of the adult male population taking monastic orders.
- The intermeshing of two forms of religious authority: monastic on the one hand, and lamaic (focused in particular on the tantric teacher) on the other. A particular feature of this was the rise of a class of highly authoritative reincarnating teachers, called incarnate lamas (*tulku*), who were distinct in both status and duties, either from ordinary monks or lay tantric specialists.
- The almost universal integration of tantric and clerical forms of Buddhism, and the complex and ambiguous framing of such practices within a wider context of rituals aimed at addressing a pervasive cultural background of chthonic, or tellurian, forces, often conceptualised in terms of cosmologies of mountain and local area gods.
- The integration of all of these features into systems of theocratic governance, often centred on the legitimising authority of incarnate lamas (such as the Karmapa, Panchen and Dalai Lamas), who were regarded as manifestations of celestial Buddhas.

In this work, I will argue that underlying all of these features of Tibetan Buddhism is an indigenous understanding of ritual and religious authority which is both distinct and highly systematic. This can be witnessed at all levels of Tibetan Buddhist ritual life, from the relationship between a local monastery such as Kumbum and its nearby villages, up to and including the structuring of law and state in the pre-1950 state of Central Tibet.
**Figure 4** Kumbum gompa: upper floor overall monastery layout.

**Figure 5** Kumbum gompa: middle floor and overall monastery layout.
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rDo.rje.nam.par.’joms.pa’ai.sgo.nas.dkar.phyogs.vnams.la.ri.khrus.klung.khrus.
bcas.bzhugs.soil In: bLa.ma’n.nal.’byor.dang.lyi.dam.khag.gl. bdag. bskyed.
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Lha bsangs phyogs bsdus.dang.lsdg.bskyad.gser.gnyens.chnag.'phyin.bskul
bod.bskyang.lda srung.gi.'phyin.bskul.dang.lbd. gsn. tshig.sogs.bzhugs. soll

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