

A Study of Rituals of Tibetan Bonpos at Solan, Himachal Pradesh

In 1959, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and around 85,000 Tibetans were forced to leave Tibet to seek refuge, primarily in India, Nepal and Bhutan. A group of Bonpo lamas and laymen also left Tibet and took shelter at Kulu and Manali in Himachal Pradesh. Because of climatic differences between India and Tibet and the lack of help from charitable organisations, the conditions in which they were compelled to live were very pitiable. A large number of them passed away including Sherab Lodro, the abbot of Menri (sMan-ri), the main Bonpo monastery in Tibet. From the mid-sixties onwards, a determined effort was made to establish a proper refugee settlement. With the help and sponsorship of the Catholic Relief Service, Tenzin Namdak, the former chief tutor of Menri monastery settled at Dolanjee, near Solan in Himachal Pradesh along with about seventy families from Manali. In 1969, the settlement was firmly established and named Thobgyal Sarpa, after the village Thobgyal in Tibet that was situated near the monastery of Menri. At present this Bonpo community consists of approximately one hundred households and a monastery (housing about a hundred monks), which is situated above the village. In the monastery, there are about thirty adult monks, many of them fully ordained (drang-strong). There is also an equal number of younger monks, attending the eight year monastic school in order to obtain the degree of dge-bshes. About forty boys live in the monastery as novices, under the personal care of the Abbot (mkhan-po), named Sangye Tenzin Jongdong, who was elected as the 33rd Abbot in 1968, and is considered as continuing the sMan-ri lineage of abbots.

The monastery is open to the needs of the local community of which it is a part. It is also a centre of religious life for thousands of Bonpos in India and Nepal and a place in which religious life is carried on faithfully along traditional lines. An attempt is made here to discuss the rituals, performed by the Tibetan Bonpos at Dolanjee, near Solan in Himachal Pradesh.

The religious activities of the monks are, generally speaking, of two kinds. The first of these are scholastic studies and calendrical festivals and the second the performance of the rituals by the monks. The calendrical festivals are generally held on the days of the birth and death of Ston-pa-gshen-rab, as well as of certain other important lamas, Losar etc. Death rituals fall in the latter category. They are commissioned by the relatives of the deceased and usually performed

by two or three monks, in the monastery or in the chapel of a private house.

The rituals are taken from the so-called 'Drid-med gzi-brjid rab-tu 'bar-ba's mdo, which contains the biography of Lord gShen-rab mi-bo in twelve volumes of sixty-one chapters. It is presented as a series of *sutras* (mdo) delivered by Shenrap to his followers. In twelve of these *sutras* Shenrap delivers the instructions and liturgies for twelve rituals (cho-qa bcu-gnis), which are performed regularly to this day by the Bonpos. There is a difference in the Bonpo rituals and the Buddhist rituals. The latter have no canonical basis (in the sense of actual or purported Buddha-word) in their existing form. The liturgical and actional units which constitute them are derived either from the tantras themselves or from the ancillary sādhana and other ritual literature, much of which is extra-canonical, often of an acknowledged recent date. Historical traditions exist as to how the rituals were built up in Tibet into their present forms. In the case of Bonpos, we have complete and developed rituals with their liturgies specified in minute details in the basic canon (bka'-'gyur) [Cf. Denwood, Phillip, 'Notes on Some Tibetan Bonpo Rituals' in the *Buddhist Studies: Ancient and Modern*, Curzon Press, 1983, pp.12-19].

The Tibetan Bonpo rituals are known as the 'Universal Mandala of the Five Bodies' (Kun-dbyings sku-lnga dkyil-'khor). Shenrap has outlined the thirty one stages in performing the rituals. The text gZi-brjid (Vol. ga. f. 122) describes both the actions of the rituals and their accompanying liturgy, both of which are in thirty one sections. The introductory section (sngon-dro) comprises ten preparatory rites (*vidhi*), which set up the *mandala* and ritually prepare it. The text clearly envisages the careful construction of an actual three dimensional *mandala*, but since it is the mental part of the activity which is more important, it is not strictly necessary to make the physical *mandala*. The ten rites are :

1. Raising the foundations
2. Building up the *mandala*
3. Marking with strings
4. Placing the pure clothing
5. Making preparations
6. Drawing the *mandala*
7. Describing the *mandala*
8. Arranging the ornaments
9. Arranging the offerings
10. Meditating on the *mandala* with the three kinds of samādhi.

The main part (dngos-gzhi) comprises fifteen rites. First are the five 'consecrating' rites concerned with inviting and bringing the divinities to their places in the *mandala*. These are:

1. Offering of seats
2. Invitation
3. Delighting
4. Establishing
5. Consecration

Then come five rites of pleasing the divinities:

6. Salutation
7. Confession
8. Worship
9. Praises
10. General Worship.

Then follow five 'activities' :

11. Receiving the five strengths
12. Praising by means of one's good qualities
13. Worshipping the major divinities
14. Regarding the six classes of beings with compassion
15. Prayer

The concluding section (rjes-jug) comprises five rites. These are:

1. Opening the doors to the mandala,
2. Revealing the faces of the divinities
3. Invitation
4. Generation of the divinities
5. Generation of the seats and palaces.

The whole process closes with a prayer.

The death ritual of Bonpos asserts to be non-Buddhist and at times even anti-Buddhist. Before the death of the King Gri-gum btsan-po, who was the first king not to clamber back into heaven up the heavenly ladder, the Bonpos had no specific death ritual. His body was, therefore, buried by his sons under a pointed tent-shaped tumulus of stamped earth. It is interesting to note that the Tibetan Bon-pos were not sufficiently acquainted with the appropriate rites and therefore had to bring in three Bon priests from the west, from Kashmir, Gilgit and Guge, one of whom possessed the necessary knowledge. This man carried out an operation known as the 'Taming of the Dead' – apparently with a magic knife. At a later period, the

Bon-po codified all the chief rites and laid down '360 ways of Death', 'four ways of preparing graves', and 'eighty-one ways of taming evil spirits' [Cf. Sarat Chandra Das, 'Contribution on the Religion, History of Tibet', in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1881, Part I, p. 204].

There are three independent rites, which together make up the whole business of helping the dead find salvation beyond the process of existence :

1. 'pho-ba. It means the 'transference of consciousness', which is a post-mortem rite performed by a monk. It consists of the traditional guidance of the deceased's consciousness by way of textual recitation (thos-grol) aiming at final liberation.

2. byang-chog. It is known as the 'drawing-ritual', which is the gradual guidance of the deceased's drawn effigy towards liberation.

3. The last step is the cremation of the corpse, which is followed by the Klong-rgyas ('extended vastness') ritual.

Per Kvaerne in his book *Tibet: Bon Religion* [Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1985, pp. 1-34] has described in great detail the byang-chog, accompanied by a series of informative illustrations and drawings which enable us to gain a clear and overall idea of the whole ceremony. Initially a ransom (glud) of the deceased is offered, in the shape of a little effigy made of dough. Being presented to the malignant spirits, they are most earnestly solicited not to interfere in the rite, whereafter the figure is thrown away. Then the consciousness of the deceased is summoned ('gugs-pa) to the place and is eventually transferred onto a tablet (byang-bu), a drawing of the dead, followed by a so-called aspersion Khrus-gsol of the ritual drawing i.e. of the body of the deceased, with lustral water. This is succeeded by the writing of a series of seed-syllables, each with their symbolic value. A number of symbolic offerings then follow, all presented to the dead person and depicted on special cards (tsag-li), especially designed for this rite. These cards show respectively a dwelling, bodily form, the six sense-objects and six animals (representing mental qualities) of which three animals – the yak, the horse and the sheep – played a salient role in the ancient funerary rites of the Tibetan kings. Some aspects of the ritual fall into the category of adaptations from standard Buddhist practice, while others are traced back to pre-Buddhist observances, which includes the ransom offering, the use of tsag-li (ritual cards) for the presentation of offerings and other purposes, and the choice of a yak, horse and sheep to show the consciousness, the way of liberation. The role of these animals really separates the Bonpos from their Buddhist counterparts: the ransom and the use of

tsag-li are well known to Buddhist tradition, too.

Per Kvaerne then enumerates the group of deities which subsequently confront the deceased in his journey towards liberation. Four groups of deities, each drawn on tsag-li cards, take part in the ceremony, respectively the Six Subduing qShen, the Thirteen Primeval gShen, the Four Main Blessed Ones and finally a drawing of the All-Good (Kun-tu bzang po: Skt. Samantabhadra). In each step, Kvaerne provides ample information about their ritual function and their attributes. The deceased, having now passed from a mundane realm to a supramundane sphere, is subsequently bestowed with four successive consecrations (dbang): the vase (bum-pa), the Root deities, the Cake (gtor-ma) consecration and finally the Nectar Consecration, thus differing considerably from the traditional four Buddhist consecrations. At this stage of the ceremony, the deceased is no more a mortal being but a so-called Eternal Spiritual Hero (gYung-drung sems-dpa'), who, it is supposed, finally will proceed through thirteen successive stages, and ascent resembling the bodhisattva's career in Buddhism. Finally, the byang-bu is dismantled and the drawing is burnt.

Now, the question arises as to how these rituals are being experienced by the Bonpos in theory and in daily practice? Philip Denwood says that as far as theory is concerned, the whole range of Bonpo practices from the simplest rite to the most refined meditation is schematized under 'Nine ways'. These rituals fit in the third of these, translated by Snellgrove as the 'Way of Shen of Illusion'. The basic tantric theory behind them is that as the nature of the phenomenal world is illusory, the practitioner by attaining realization of his unity with divinity to whom the rite is addressed, is able to manipulate that illusion to (a) any particular desire end and (b) for the benefit of living beings in general [Denwood, Philip, op.cit., pp.17-18].

When I visited the Bonpo monastery at Dolanjee on May 5, 1995, the abbot of the monastery Sangye Tenzin Jongdong told me a very interesting story relating to the death ritual.

Tenzin Namdak was entrusted with the task of purchasing the land for the settlement of Bonpos. He was negotiating the purchase of the land with the landowner at Solan. The people, who were cultivating the land were however, not inclined to vacate and leave the place. When the people did not agree to leave the place, the landowner called a meeting at night and said, 'I have been asked by the Government of India to sell the lands to the immigrant Tibetan Bonpos. So, you people have to vacate this place. 'Kindly take some

money to settle in another places.' Even after the repeated requests of the landowner, the cultivators did not appear to be in a mood to vacate the place. Thereafter, the landowner made a false story about the Tibetan Bonpos and said to the cultivators, 'These Tibetan Bonpos eat the flesh of human beings. So, I am leaving the place. If you people like to stay here, you can live here, but the responsibility will be yours'. The people of Dolanjee became frightened after hearing this concocted story about the Tibetans. Immediately after that they agreed to vacate the land and were given some money by the landowner to settle elsewhere. After that, the land was sold to the immigrant Tibetan Bonpos.

It is evident from this that the other inhabitants of Dolanjee, were not interacting with the Tibetans. This would account for their readiness to believe that the Tibetans were taking the flesh of human beings. The death rituals of Bonpos are being performed in a very secretive manner unlike those of the Hindus and the cremation does not take place upon the bank of the river. Actually, the death rituals of Bonpos are conducted over about 4-5 days and the corpse is kept for this duration. Thereafter, the cremation follows in a very neat and clean place. Previously, the Bonpos also feared the disapproval of the people of nearby villages because of their practice of keeping the corpse for several days in order to complete the ritual. The abbot of the monastery, therefore, requested the local authorities (police station) for permission to keep the corpse for this period in order to perform the rituals. The authorities told the abbot of the monastery that they had no objection to this practice as long as it did not create problems for the other people. Then, the abbot of the monastery used to perform the death rituals as usual. The people of the nearby villages, however, continued to believe that the Bonpos were consuming human flesh and for that reason performed the death rituals in a very secret manner and cremated the body during the night only and that too not on the bank of the river. Subsequently the abbot of the monastery was successful in removing even this misconception amongst the local villagers. In the meantime another incident occurred. A man of a nearby village died and the corpse was taken to the bank of the river outside the village for cremation. When the pyre was about to be lit, the 'dead body' got up slowly from the pyre. The man, it appears, had not actually died and is still alive and well. From then on, the people of the nearby village have begun believing that the dead body should not be cremated immediately after the person dies.

When the people came into friendlier and closer contact with

abbot of the monastery and other Bonpos the false story of the landowner came to surface. Now, the people of nearby villages participate in the death rituals of the Bonpos and the Bonpo priests are also called on by the local people to perform the death rituals. Whenever religious functions are celebrated in the monastery all the local people are also invited to participate. Some of the professors of Dr. Yaswant Singh Parmar University of Horticulture, Solan are also invited to attend the function. These functions are an important part of the monastery's activities whose daily, monthly and annual timetable is marked by a regular series of rituals, performed by the monks. Additional rites are also performed on the demand of the local people.

The Bonpos are also propagating ideal ways for the local people to lead a happy and prosperous life. The latter have stopped meat-eating and taking alcohol and developed greater faith and devotion towards the Bonpos. Even the wives of local people are discouraging their husbands from taking alcohol. Thus, the Bonpos have contributed towards the spiritual development of the local society.

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The Advaitic Ontology and its Epistemological Foundation

'Is-Ought' problem is very popular among the Moral philosophers specially in the West. They try to dilute the dichotomy between 'Is' and 'Ought' or the actual and the ideal as well as fact and value with the help of Hedonistic Ethics and Kantian Ethics.

Bradley among the critics of Western Ethics makes a very pertinent observation about the incompleteness of both these Ethics. Hedonistic Ethics is pleasure for the sake of pleasure which by and large rests on Psychological Hedonism. This is merely the statement of a fact and which through subterfuge is merely raised to the status of a moral ideal. Actually it presents the 'Is' without 'Ought'. So being one sided it is unable to preserve both 'Is' and 'Ought'.

Kantian ethics which is duty for the sake of duty is also one sided in the sense that it presents the 'Ought' without the 'Is'. This remains an ideal which has no moorings in actuality. This was also observed by W.H. Urban in 'Kant and Modern Axiology' when he says that in