FILM GUIDE

Tibetan Buddhism: Cycles of Interdependence

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TIBETAN BUDDHISM:
CYCLES OF INTERDEPENDENCE

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MAP SHOWING LOCATION OF LUKHIL MONASTERY IN LADAKH, INDIA
SYNOPSIS

Filmed in Ladakh in the state of Jammu and Kashmir (India), where the mountain terrain resembles Tibetan, this film illustrates the symbiotic relationships that exist between a Tibetan Buddhist lay community and its related monastery. We see lay members of Buddhist families trying to incorporate Buddha's ethical precepts into their daily lives as they go about their farming and household activities. We observe families at harvest time contributing grain and other produce to support the monastery. One of the male or female members of most families is expected to enter the monastery for a lifetime; others may enter for brief periods. In return, the monastery educates the laity's children, and its monks enter lay homes to aid in the diagnosis and treatment of the sick and to perform life-cycle rituals designed to enrich people's spiritual lives and to enhance the quality and quantity of the harvest. The monastery also periodically performs religiously meritorious activities that gain spiritual benefit for the entire community. The film concludes with the annual winter festival, when families from the entire valley gather in the monastery courtyard to witness masked and costumed monks invoke the protector deities to insure the survival of the valley, the people, and the monastery for another year.

SUGGESTED USE

Anthropology/Sociology of Religion
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Eastern Religions
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History of Religion
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INFORMATION DETAILS OF THE FILM (Note: The questions are arranged in the sequence in which the film presents the relevant material.)

1. Different dancers are wearing different masks. One mask even looks like it might be that of a dog. What do the different masks represent?

Evil spirits are chased away at the end of the old year and beginning of the new year by Dharma protectors such as Mahakala, Kali, and Dharmaraja. Here, Dharmaraja is the protector. And he is accompanied by his whole retinue, including his consort and attending deities. These deities are represented by the masks and costumes of the dancers. Two of the attending deities are lion-headed. The "dog-like" mask probably represents one of these.

2. What is the significance of the colored flags that fly from the walls of the monastery?

The prayer flags on the walls of the monastery are silk. In the center of the flag is a deity (such as the Buddha or a spiritual guru) from whom hang beautifully arranged jewels, bells, precious stones, auspicious signs, etc. in a netlike, many-colored pattern of silk. These represent the numerous kinds of offering objects. As the flags flutter, the prayer goes off...
for the blessing of all sentient beings.

3. What kind of animal are the man and the boy leading down the hill?
It is a dzo, a cross between a cow and a yak. Female dzos are good for milk, and male dzos are excellent for plowing, carrying loads and transportation. As a rule, dzos are somewhat tougher than yaks and easier to tame.

4. The kitchen shown in the film seems fairly large and well-lined with copper cooking pots and other utensils. Is this a typical kitchen? Or is this the kitchen of a rich family?

This is the kitchen of a large family living in the village. The family spends most of its time together in the kitchen to eat, drink tea gather round the warmth of the stove, etc. Because it is the family gathering place, serving both as kitchen and living room, it is larger than most western kitchens.

5. What kind of bread is the young wife cooking?
She is cooking chapattis made with wheat flour.

6. What is the typical Tibetan system of land inheritance among sons?
Generally, after the father dies, the eldest son becomes the leader of the family and inherits the land. Sometimes the other sons move away and join other families. Other times they stay on to help work the land, organize other family businesses, etc. The extended family then works together as an economic unit and lives together.

7. Why do the students sound as though they are singing when they read their lessons out loud?
In order to memorize their texts, the students must repeat their lines many times. A chanting rhythm facilitates memorization. In the film, the students are practicing their spelling; first saying a word’s prefix, then the root letter with vowel, subscript superscript, suffix and secondary suffix. Then they pronounce the combination. The rhythm helps them glide through the complex phonetics.

8. What are the long horns called that the monks are blowing, and what are they made of?
The horns are called “dung chen.” Originally “dung” referred to the conch shell used to call monks to religious gatherings. Now it also refers to the great horns shown in the film. A dung chen is usually made out of red or yellow copper. Each joint is specially decorated with silver or copper of a different color. Occasionally the whole horn is made out of silver. It is used to call the monks and to make religious music invoking the deities.

9. What (if anything) are the food-dough tormas supposed to look like? Are they merely abstract designs” Or do they represent some kind of symbols?
The torma is a tantric food offering that is meditatively transformed into a pure substance and then offered in order to accomplish one of four tantric religious purposes. The shape and color of the torma symbolize these purposes. A white, round torma is for pacifying disturbances. A yellow square torma is for increasing beneficial qualities. A red, crescent shaped torma is for spiritual power. A dark blue or black triangular torma is for
destroying hindrances and confusion. These are all immediate purposes. The ultimate purpose of Buddhist tantric practice is the attainment of Enlightenment itself.

10. In the Cham dance, who decides which monks wear which masks and take which roles?

The group authority for this role decides. There may be a Cham master who decides. Otherwise it may be the abbot of the monk’s monastery.

11. Why does the mask of Dharmaraja have horns?

According to Tibetan legend, a holy man went to a cave to do fifty years of ascetic religious practice. One day before he had completed his practice, two robbers who had stolen a bull entered the cave in order to butcher it. They proceeded to cut off the bull’s head, but then became aware of the presence of the ascetic. Realizing he was a witness to their theft the robbers decided to kill him. The ascetic begged for his life as he needed only one more day to achieve Nirvana. But the robbers would not listen to him and cut off his head. At this, the ascetic’s body transformed into that of Yama Lord of Death, picked up the bull’s head, and joined it to its own headless shoulders. The bull-headed Yama then killed the two robbers, drank their blood, and terrorized all of Tibet. The Tibetans prayed for help to their tutelary deity, Majusri, who transformed himself into the terrible form of Yamantaka and fought a terrific battle with Yama. In the end Yamantaka was victorious. Yama converted to Buddhism and became the Dharma protector known as “Dharmaraja.”

12. Why does the Sitapa mask have flags stuck to it?

Sitapa is a local Ladakhi deity. In general, banners signify victory over the forces of evil, delusion, negativity, etc. They may have the same signification here.

13. What are the fur-lined coats made out of that so many of the villagers wear?

The coats are made out of the skins of various types of furry animals such as the fox or the sheep.

14. Where do all the cham-festival monastery visitors stay at night?

Generally visitors stay with various families and friends nearby. Male visitors who have relatives or friends in the monastery can stay there. If there is a nunnery, women can stay with the nuns there.

15. Where does the red coloring come from for so many of the Tibetan’s clothes?

Nowadays western dyes are sometimes used. Usually, though, the red coloring is of local vegetable origin, acquired from the roots of the madder plants.

16. What are the landholding arrangements of the monasteries?

In Tibet monasteries usually did not allow monks to work the fields, as this violated the Buddhist Vinaya rules. The monasteries acquired land through donations made by devoted laymen. Often the land was rented to lay farmers who subsequently cultivated it. At harvest time the monastery sent a representative to collect the rent in the form of a percentage of the crop.
17. Why are skulls such a prominent part of the decorations?

All of the tantric implements, offerings and symbols, such as the skull, have many profound levels of meaning, which for the most part is a close-kept secret of the practice. In general, the skull symbolizes impermanence. Like the other tantric materials, it is also understood to be a manifestation of the Enlightened Wisdom of the Inseparability of Bliss and Voidness.

18. The village representative who comes to the astrologer pulls a teacup out from under the Folds of his clothes. Is it common for people to carry their teacups around with them?

Yes. Tibetans carry a wooden teacup with them wherever they go. The cup is an individual, unshared possession and is always kept ready in case tea should be offered.

19. Reference is made to a strong alcoholic drink called chang. What is chang made of, and how strong is it?

Chang is usually made of fermented barley (although in some places, such as Bhutan, it is made from rice or corn). It comes in three basic degrees of dilution. The least dilute is very strong, like a strong whiskey. The most dilute is about as strong as our beer.

20. Is there any significance to the barley dough and flour that are spread on the farmers' faces when the official announcement is made about the opening of the plowing season?

This tradition is of local Ladakhi origin and has no special meaning within Buddhism.

21. Who is the goddess Dolma ("Sgrol ma"), and how did she become the "benevolent protectress of the people"?

Many divine forms depicted in Buddhist paintings symbolized individual characteristics of the Buddha. The Buddha's four most fundamental qualities, often referred to in the scriptures, are his wisdom, compassion, power and activity. Each of these is represented by a characteristic deity. Buddha's wisdom is embodied in Manjusri, gold in color and wielding a sword. His compassion is embodied in Avalokitesvar, who is white. His power is Vajrapani, dark blue in color and wrathful. His compassionate activity is Tara, green in color, with a gesture of giving. Tara represents Buddha's capacity to manifest in many forms so as to protect living beings by subtly indicating to them the spiritual paths to liberation from cyclic existence (samsara). Tara's left leg is folded, indicating she is in meditation; and her right leg is extended, indicating her activity. This means she is always actively working for sentient beings while remaining in single-pointed meditation. "Tara" is her Sanskrit name. In Tibetan she is called Dolma (Sgrol ma), literally "saviourness," "liberator." The Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang wrote that there were many statues of her in North India when he visited there in the 7th century C.E. Atisa, the great Indian sage and founder of the Bka gdamgs pa school, was devoted to her as his special tutelary deity. It is believed that through his numerous lineages of disciples, intense devotion to Tara spread throughout Tibet.

22. What are the basic principles of the Tibetan medical system? And how can it blend together so many different medical traditions (e.g., Persian, Arabic, Chinese,
and Indian)?

Although within the Tibetan medical system there are elements of various medical traditions, it is based primarily on the Rgyud bzhi (the four medical tantras) which are Indian scriptures attributed to the Buddha in his manifestation as the "Medicinal Buddha" (Bhaisajya Guru). The medical system based on these texts holds that disease is caused by an imbalance of various mental, physical, and spiritual energies. This imbalance is caused at two different levels of being. At the most basic level, its fundamental causes are previous emotional afflictions (such as hatred, ignorance, and attachment) and karma (the mental and physical actions motivated by the affictions). At a more superficial level, its immediate causes are dietary, environmental, and internal factors affecting the physical components of the body.

23. Does the plant "karpo" actually stop worm infections?

Most western medicines were derived from earlier herbal remedies. It is quite possible that the karpo plant does actually stop worm infections.

24. What are the significance of the bell in the abbot's left hand and the thunderbolt in the abbot's right hand?

In most general terms, the bell in the left hand symbolizes the wisdom aspect of spiritual practice. The thunderbolt (Tibetan: "dor je") in the right hand symbolizes the method aspect "Wisdom" and "Method" have many profound levels of meaning in Sutrayana and Tantrayana Buddhism. A bird is traditionally taken as an analogy to demonstrate the importance of both aspects. Without both wings, the bird cannot fly. Similarly, without both wisdom and method, the practitioner of the Buddha's teaching cannot reach Enlightenment.

25. Is it typical for a family home to have as large and elaborate a chapel as the one shown in the film, with a many-headed central icon and many niches with what look like separate Buddhas?

Most Tibetans are deeply committed Buddhists, but they do not share the Western custom of gathering once a week as a group in church. Their religious practice for the most part is private and done in the home. Therefore, it is very typical for the family to have private prayer chapels in their own rooms. The family chapel typically contains statues, paintings, scriptures, and an elaborate altar containing various offerings. The body, speech and mind of the Buddha are represented by statues, scriptures, and stupas respectively. Wealthy families sometimes have a complete set of scriptures. They invite monks to come to their home to recite them. They sometimes also invite monks to join them in prayer sessions and rituals.

26. The family shown harvesting appears to be singing or chanting something. What do the words of that chant (or similar chants) say?

The words have little significance, paralleling Western words like "tra-la-la" and "yo-ho-ho!" But they provide a rhythm that seems to make it easier to work.

27. What happens during the winnowing process?

The grain is separated from the chaff.
28. While people are winnowing and sifting the barley, it sounds as though they are whistling.

Sometimes, when not singing, they whistle to the same tunes as their songs.

29. Is there a division of labor between what women do and what men do in the fieldwork?

Both men and women together do the harvesting, cutting, threshing and sifting. For the most part only the men do the plowing.

30. The narrative mentions four great Tibetan Buddhist traditions. What are their names?

The four schools are the Kagyupa (Bka' brgyud pa), Gelukpa (Dge lugs pa), Nyingmapa (Rnying ma pa), and the Sakyapa (Sa skya pa). See A SHORT HISTORY OF THE FOUR SCHOOLS OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM that follows the section on information details of the film.

31. What are the yellow hats made out of? And why are they yellow?

Two types of hats are traditionally worn by monks of the Dge lugs pa sect. Each detail in the construction of the hats is symbolic of some aspect of the Buddhist teaching. The pan zhwa (pandit's hat) is made out of a flannel-like material or silk. It is very tall and comes to a point. Its height indicates that the Buddha's teaching leads beyond (samsara) to a lofty place (Enlightenment). It is bent over slightly at its peak, showing compassion and love for sentient beings caught in cyclic existence (samsara). In back, it separates into two parts that overlap. This symbolizes the conjunction of method and wisdom. The second type of hat, the tshogs zhwa (hat for assemblies), is worn by monks occasionally when they gather together for special activities. It looks somewhat like a Roman hat with two long tails in back and a top piece composed of a thousand vertical filaments. The two tails join (again showing method and wisdom), and the thousand filaments represent the thousand Buddhas of this eon. Both hats are supposed to be the color of the finest most pure gold. The gold color symbolizes the absolute purity of the teaching.

32. What are the significance of the prayer wheels and prayer "rattles"?

The prayer wheels and prayer "rattles" are inscribed with prayers that are activated for the blessing of all sentient beings when they are rotated.

33. What is the significance or the white scarves being passed out to the monks from the laity?

A white scarf is presented at ceremonial, ritual, and social occasions such as marriage, acceptance into monkhood, celebration of an official appointment making first acquaintance, and leave taking. The whiteness of the scarf signifies goodness, virtue, and good fortune. The scarf is presented as a sign of respect and as an omen for good fortune.

34. Is there anything significant in the presentation of Ha-Shan, the sort of tipsy Chinese monk?

It seems to be part of the Chinese folk tradition to depict Buddhist monks and bodhisattvas sometimes in the form of rather corpulent, jolly men who are surrounded by
happy children. It is possible that the Tibetans incorporated this image into the introductory portion of their ritual dance in order to begin in a lighthearted way, entertaining the audience and making them laugh. When Buddhism first spread from India to Tibet two types of obstacles arose according to Tibetan tradition: (1) The pre-Buddhist Bon spirits and deities wreaked havoc, sending famine, flood and sickness to Buddhist practitioners. Padmasambhava, the great Indian tantric master, was invited to subdue them. He converted many of them to Buddhism, and they became fearsome protectors of the faith. These are the Dharmapalas ("protectors of the teaching") depicted in the Cham ritual dance. (2) Indian Buddhism emphasized strict discipline, both analytical and concentrative meditation, and all the extensive practices of the Buddhist path. Ha Shan, a monk from China taught that Enlightenment was attained by merely stopping all thought. He said that all thoughts, both virtuous and non-virtuous, were equally harmful to liberation just as black and white clouds both blocked the rays of the sun. The king of Tibet arranged a debate between Ha Shan and the representatives of Indian Buddhism. Ha Shan was defeated and ordered to return to China henceforward, numerous Indian masters were invited to Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism developed as a direct continuation of the Indian Buddhist teaching traditions.

35. Is the divine protector Sitapa unique to this valley and this set of people?

Traditions of local, protective gods exist in many parts of the world. This appears to be the case in the Ladakhi valleys also.

36. Since the eyes of the masks don't line up with the eyes of the monks inside the masks, how do the monks see?

They see through the open mouth in the mask.

37. What is the significance of the "telling of the beads" shown in several of the sequences?

Monks always carry a rosary on which they count the mantras they are reciting when not otherwise occupied. As they count, they push the rosary beads toward themselves, symbolizing their gradual acquisition of the qualities of Enlightenment.

38. What is the effigy that the Cham master cuts into pieces?

The effigy is a human form that is placed into a small triangular house. It symbolizes all evil forces, but especially one's own egotistic and selfish views that are the root of all evil. Cutting the effigy into pieces represents wisdom cutting through and destroying that egotistic view.

39. What is the "fiery thunderbolt of Dharmaraja" supposed to look like? And what is it made out of?

Dharmaraja carries a pole upon which is carved the shape of a skeleton with its skull at the top. The torma, which represents the "fiery thunderbolt" is mostly made of dough, and contains Dharmaraja's pole in its center. The torma is triangular, and each of its corners is constructed and painted to look like fire.

40. What is the significance of certain monks in the procession having white gauze covering their mouths?

Just as surgeons wear masks to prevent their
contaminating the patient, so some monks cover their mouths with white cloth in order to keep their impure breath from defiling the sacred offering objects.

41. In the final dance, it looks as though only men take part in the actual performances (with women watching). Earlier in the film there was a dance in the fields in which both men and women took part. What are the male/female traditions?

The Cham dance is strictly a monastic religious activity, so only the monks perform it. At harvest time, the celebration in the fields is a lay affair, so everyone takes part.

42. Are there nuns and nunneries in Ladakh?

There are nuns in Ladakh. Their nunneries are supported in the same way that the monasteries are supported by donations from pious families, friends, relatives, etc. Further, at harvest time, it is the custom for both monks and nuns to receive the farmers' first portions of grain as alms. Offering the first grain of the harvest to the Sangha is believed to be especially virtuous and karmically meritorious for the farmer.

43. In the final procession up the hill after the battle with evil, the abbot of the monastery is carrying a wand-like staff with the picture of someone on the top of it (it looks like a standing figure with its right arm upraised and its legs spread apart). Who (or what) is the picture of?

Another stick in the "thunderbolt" torma has a painting of Dharmaraja at its top. This signifies that Dharmaraja is there with the thunderbolt chasing away evil. Just before throwing the torma into the fire, the abbot removes that stick and carries it back to the monastery. This shows that Dharmaraja has finished his work and is returning to the monastery to resume his duties as ever-watchful protector of the Dharma.

45. Did it actually begin to snow when it was supposed to (i.e., right after the ritual combat)?

It actually did.

46. Who makes the monk's elaborate costumes? And how are they maintained?

These costumes are used only once a year and then carefully stored. Therefore, they are very old and have been used for many generations. Typically, each monastery has several monk tailors who keep them in good repair.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE FOUR SCHOOLS OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM
Geshe Lhundup Sopa

There are quite a few systems of Tibetan Buddhism that are known by different names. There are also a number of different ways of singling out different systems for designation. Presently four systems are usually singled out and are the most well known. These are the Nyingmapa (Rnying ma pa), the Sakyapa (Sa skya pa), the Kagyupa (Bka' brgyud pa), and the Gelukpa (Dge lugs pa). There are, however, other less well known systems; and there are also a number of subsystems within these four. Some of the systems are named for the time period in which they arose. Some are named for an area of Tibet. Some are named for their special teachings, and some are named for their teachers. All the Tibetan Buddhist systems
base their thought on the four that Indian Buddhist philosophical systems (the Sarvastivada Sautrantika, Yogacara and Madhyamika). For the most part then, they cannot be definitely distinguished on the basis of their fundamental tenets. They are to be distinguished primarily historically and in terms of differences between them in the scriptures and practices that they most emphasize. Thus, for example, the Nyingmapa (Rnying ma pa) and Gsar ma pa are distinguished by the time of transmission of the tantras that they emphasize. The Bka' gdam pa, Kagyupa (Bka' brgyud pa) and Rdzog chen pa are distinguished by their special instructions for practice. And the Sakyapa (Sa skya pa), 'Bri gung pa and Stag lung pa are named for the areas of Tibet in which they we're founded. Here we will focus on the four systems that are most well known.

"Rnying ma" means "old", and the Nyingmapa (Rnying ma pa) system is so called because it emphasizes the practice of the old tantras, those that were promulgated during the early propagation of Buddhism in Tibet (7th to 9th century Common Era C.E.). The founder of this system was the great Indian tantric master Padmasambhava who came to Tibet at the invitation of the pious Buddhist king Khri srong lde brtsan (circa 776 C.E.). At a time when Buddhism was still a fledgling religion in Tibet and not yet widely accepted, Padmasambhava is reputed to have won over the people by taming terrible spirits and demons and performing many supernatural feats as a sign of his spiritual power. One of the founders of the first Tibetan monastery (called Bsam yas), Padmasambhava taught many Mahayana doctrines, both tantric and non-tantric, and won over numerous converts to the new faith. He is believed to have led many of the converts, including the king, to spiritual liberation. It is said that he buried many profound teachings which were meant to be found by future followers. Several later Nyingmapa (Rnying ma pa) teachers found these texts (called "gter ma") and wrote commentaries on them. Similarly, the masters Dharmakirti, Vimalamitra, and others transmitted tantric teachings to numerous disciples; and from these the system of the "old tantras," the Nyingmapa (Rnying ma pa) became widespread.

The other main Tibetan Buddhist systems are collectively known as "Gsar ma pa" ("new," in contradistinction to "Rnying ma pa" "old") because they teach the tantras and their commentaries that were transmitted from India from the time of the great translator Rin chen bzang po (circa early lith century C.E.). This transmission occurred during the second, later great propagation of Buddhism in Tibet.

The Kagyupa (Bka' brgyud pa) system contains two main subsystems: the Dwags po Bka' brgyud pa and the Shangs pa Bka' brgyud pa Chos kyi blo gros, famous as "Marpa the Translator," was born in 1012 C.E. He went to India several times and studied under many Buddhist gurus, the most famous of was the pandit Naropa. He heard many instructions on the Six Yogas of Naropa and other tantric teachings transmitted from Tilopa. Upon returning to Tibet he translated many Sutrayana and Tantrayana scriptures and commentaries, such as the Prainaparamita and the Guhyasamaia. He promulgated the Buddhadharma principally through his teaching and practice of the tantras, particularly the instructions on the Mahamudra and the Six Yogas of Naropa. The system of instruction and practice transmitted through him to his chief disciple, Milarepa, then to Milarepa's chief disciple, Sgam po pa (also
known as Dwags po Iha rje), and then to many others is called the "Dwags po Bka' brgyud pa." Another great Tibetan scholar, Khyung po, travelled many times to India and Nepal and studied with about 150 gurus, including Maitripa. In an area of Western Tibet called "Shangs" he established a monastery and taught many of the practices he had learned on the stages of the tantric path to thousands of disciples. The system transmitted from him is known as the "Shangs pa Bka' brgyud pa." The Dwags po Bka' brgyud contains four major subsects: the Karma Bka' brgyud, the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud, the 'Bri gung Bka' brgyud and the Stag lung Bka' brgyud. It also contains eight minor subsects.

The founder of the Sakyapa (Sa skya pa) system was 'Khon dkon mchog rgyal po, born in 1034 C.E. He studied with many scholarly gurus: 'Brog mi Lo tsa ba, 'Gos khug pa Ihas btsas, Rin chen mchog, and others. He founded a monastery in Tsang, Western Tibet, on the side of a hill that was composed of greyish white soil. In Tibetan "sa" means earth, and "skya" means grey or grey-white. Hence the monastery was named "Sa skya" as was the system he transmitted to his followers. He taught the general Mahayana doctrines and especially the theory of the new tantras (those that were transmitted to Tibet during this period). His principal teaching was the Lam 'bras, a great system of sutra and tantra transmitted from the Indian masters Virupa and Gayadhara. These teachings passed to the eminent masters Kun dga' snying po, Sa skya Pandit Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, Grags' pa rgyal mtshan, and 'Phags pa (the spiritual advisor of Khubilai Khan). Then they were transmitted through Ngor pa, Rdsong pa and others to the present time.

Before discussing the history of the Gelukpa (Dge lugs pa), it is necessary to mention the Bka' gdamgs pa sect that preceded it. In 1042 C.E., Atisa, one of the most revered Buddhist masters of India came to Western Tibet from his monastery, Vikramasila, at the invitation of the king. He composed the Bodhipatha-pradipa a seminal text that summarized all of the subjects of the Buddha's teaching, both sutra and tantra in a form that was accessible to the Tibetans and especially well suited for their establishing a solid Buddhist practice containing all essentials. Hundreds of treatises later written by Tibetan masters were organized around the structure of Atisa's text. This literature is referred to as "Lam rim" ("The stages of the spiritual path"), and through it Atisa has exercised a deep and lasting influence on all sects of Tibetan Buddhism. His followers 'Brom ston pa, Khu ston brtson 'grus gyu drung, Rngogs legs pa'i shes rab and others requested numerous teachings which they transmitted to their disciples. This system came to be known as the "bka' gdamgs" ("special instruction"), and its followers from the time of Atisa up to the time of Tsong kha pa are known as the "Early Bka' gdamgs pas.

Tsong kha pa, born in 1357 C.E. in far Northeast Tibet, was a synoptic scholar and great practitioner who carefully studied all of the leading Tibetan Buddhist systems of his time. He chose to emphasize particularly the teachings of the Early Bka' gdamgs pas. By this period in Tibetan history, there was a significant degeneration in the spirit of renunciation and the ethical code upon which all pure Buddhist practice rests, both Sutrayana and Tantrayana. Tsong kha pa scrutinized the Indian scriptures and commentaries and with unmatched erudition reestablished the highest standards of philosophical clarity and moral purpose in the
theory and practice of Buddhism in Tibet. He attracted thousands of followers who were refreshed by his lucid approach and blameless reputation, and through him the Bka' gdamgs system was invigorated and widely disseminated. He founded a monastery near Lhasa called "Ri bo Dga' Idan" ("Joyous Mountain") where he taught and wrote. His followers were known as the "New Bka' gdamgs pas," and were also named "Dga' Idan lugs pas" after the monastery. In time, the name "Dga' Idan lugs pa" took the form Gelukpa ("Dge lugs pa" "model of virtue"), and it is by the latter name that the system is known to this day.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE OF A TIBETAN BUDDHIST MONASTERY
Geshe Lhundup Sopa

The large Gelukpa (Dge lugs pa) monasteries, such as Sera, have three basic levels of organization: the monastery as a whole is called the tshogs chen. The colleges within the monastery are called the grwa tshangs. The fraternal-regional subunits of the colleges are called the khang tshangs. Each of these organizational levels is partially autonomous administratively and economically (although each is ultimately under the authority of the next higher level). Thus, the tshongs chen, its grwa tshangs and its khang tshangs each have their own properties, estates or sources of revenue that were specifically donated to them. The grwa tshang is the most fundamental administrative unit, something like the college of modern universities. Besides having administrative and economic autonomy in its own domain, the grwa tshang has autonomy in its selection of yig chas (textbooks), the order of its curriculum, and its discipline. Thus, the tantric colleges, which are grwa tshangs, are famous for their exceptionally strict discipline and specialized curricula.

The spiritual and administrative head of the grwa tshangs is the mkhan po or abbot. He is elected by the graduates of that grwa tshang and then approved by the Dalai Lama or Regent serving six or seven years. He appoints a committee to help him administer the college, selecting some of the committee members from a list of qualified persons nominated by the various khang tshangs. An important member of this committee is the phyag mdzod. Often individuals, families of monks, etc. give endowments of property or money to a grwa tshang, the interest of which is to be used to pay for special religious and ritual performances on designated days of the year. The phyag mdzod is appointed for a three-year term, at the beginning of which he is presented with capital representing the interest on those endowments. His assistants employ that capital to purchase the necessary materials, offerings, etc. for the rituals; and tea and porridge for the monks participating. Some years after an endowment is made, inflation decreases the value of its interest. Yet the phyag mdzod is charged with seeing that there is enough capital to perform all the prescribed rituals anyway. Therefore, he finds it necessary to increase the capital he receives by engaging in various trade and business arrangements on behalf of the grwa tshang. This is quite a responsibility, because at the end of his three-year term he must return at least the same amount of capital that he was first given. In fact it is customary for him to supplement that, even if he must do so with his own private resources.

Other important members of the grwa
tshang's administrative committee are the dbu mdzad who leads the assembly of monks in their daily recitations of sacred meditation texts, the dge bskos, who is charged with maintaining discipline, and other senior Geshes.

The semi-autonomous subunit of the grwa tshang is the khang tshang. It is organized like the grwa tshang; but members all come from a particular region of Tibet or Mongolia. The individual khan tshan is set apart in its own dormitories, and this combines with the geographical and lingual grouping to create a close-knit fraternal organization. Different khang tshans possess different material resources, depending on the prosperity and devotion of the regions from which they draw their monks. All of them share in the revenues of the grwa tshang, just as all grwa tshans share in the revenues of their monastery (the tshogs chen). The khan tshang is run by a committee of senior monks elected by its members on the basis of their seniority. Such committee service is obligatory. The positions on this committee are essentially the same as those of the grwa tshang's committee.

Above the grwa tshang organizations is the administrative council of the tshog chen, called the bla spyi. It is composed, for the most part of the past and present abbots of the constituent grwa tshangs and presided over by the senior-most abbot. The rest of the bla spyi contains the counterparts of the grwa tshang committee. Thus there is a tshogs chen dbu mdzad, who leads the recitations of sacred texts, a tshogs chen dge bskos, who maintains discipline, etc. Each of the officials at this level is nominated by the monastery and appointed by the Dalai Lama or Regent.

The above committees run the monastery's day-to-day affairs. When an especially urgent decision is required, a legislative conference may be convened on any one of the three levels. Such a conference, called a tshog sdu, includes a broad representation of the constituents of that monastic level.

This completes a brief description of the internal structure of the larger Gelukpa (Dge lugs pa) monasteries. The smaller monasteries are, for the most part modelled on these.

TYPICAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN A FAMILY AND A LOCAL MONASTERY
Geshe Lhundup Sopa

At the very heart of the practice of Buddhism, for lay persons and clergy alike, is the strong intention to find ultimate refuge in the spiritual side of life, which is stable and dependable, rather than in mundane things, which are transient and undependable. The spiritual side is embodied in three objects of refuge: Buddha, the perfect teacher, Dharma the spiritual truths and practices he taught; and Sangha, the community of monks and nuns who currently practice and disseminate his teaching. Buddhists believe that the mental and physical actions of living beings leave a deep imprint on their own psyches, which profoundly affects the nature of their experience in future lives. This is the doctrine of karma (action and its results). Because of their belief in karma Buddhists think it most important to cultivate virtuous mental and physical behaviors that will put imprints into their minds for pleasant (rather than painful) future experiences, and more importantly, for continued spiritual growth. For this reason,
during the time of Sakyamuni Buddha, lay people rejoiced when the Buddha came to their village begging for alms because it gave them the opportunity to practice giving to a most potent karmic object and thereby to plant seeds of good karma and spirit into their psyches that would later bear them excellent spiritual fruit. In this way Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, known as the "Three Jewels of Refuge," together comprise a most fertile spiritual field in which practicing Buddhists take refuge and to which they provide offerings.

To Tibetan lay people, the nearby monasteries and nunneries represent all three objects of refuge. Neither Buddha nor Dharma being abstract are concretely present before their eyes; but the monks and nuns of the Sangha are. The Sangha embodies the Sangha Jewel, teaches and practices the Dharma Jewel, and explains the qualities of the Buddha Jewel. The Sangha then, is the principal means through which lay people come in contact with the highest spiritual forces. It is absolutely sacred to them.

As we would expect Tibetan families are anxious to send at least one family member into monastic life. Lay people, busy making a living, do not have time to do intensive ritual and meditative practice; but they feel that at least one family member should be spared to do so. Families then support their monk or nun as much as possible, often putting aside a plot of land whose yield is used toward that support. Monks and nuns require a certain minimal amount of food, clothing, and household goods; and they must rely principally upon their families or other lay patrons for it. From the family's point of view, its whole economic endeavor, insofar as it supports a Sangha member, becomes a religious practice. Family members feel protected knowing that one of the Sangha specifically remembers them as beloved family. They believe, that his or her prayers and practices will benefit them, directly or indirectly. Often members of the younger generation observe, over a period of time, the excellent character and learning of their monastic aunt or uncle; and they too conceive a strong desire to enter monastic life. In such a way, the tradition continues over generations.

Lacking the leisure time to do such meditation, lay people make offerings and charity the cornerstone of their own religious practice. Besides supporting their own Sangha relations, they often give the Sangha as a whole various offerings to be used for specific religious rituals and ceremonies. This generates great karmic spirit for the donors as well as the participant. They also give what they can to the poor and the sick, feed hungry animals, etc. Even the tiniest altruistic action is understood to be a potent source of spiritual merit.

Just as the Sangha relies on lay people for support, lay people rely on the Sangha for help in many critical life situations. At the times for planting and harvesting crops, the monks are asked to perform the seasonal rituals that insure fertile fields and healthy yields. Other rituals are required to prevent natural disasters such as floods, harmful insects and fires. Assistance from the lamas and monks is crucial during times of personal crisis. Special rites are done to help cure or comfort the sick. Almost all the Tibetan doctors are monks. Tibetans understand illness to result not only from immediate physical conditions but also from deeper causes within the human psyche. Medical
treatment then, must involve not only physical medicine, but also mental and spiritual medicine, i.e. religious practice done by or on behalf of the patient.

Death, being the time of transition to the next life, is an especially critical time for Buddhists. Monks are invited to the home to advise the dying person in his or her own meditational practices, and to do many rituals and offer prayers that assist the dying person's passage to the next life. The type of future rebirth, however, principally determined by the nature of the dying person's own mind, habits of non-virtue or virtue, and of concern for others or selfish concern. Thus, even more important than having the Sangha available at one's death is to have the Sangha available throughout one's life, giving spiritual teaching and guidance, helping one develop compassionate habits of thought and serving as inspirational models so that lay people may better practice the Buddha's teachings.

Milarepa, a famous Tibetan yogin and teacher, joyfully observed the relationship between the great ascetic mediator on the mountain, engaged in intensive religious practice, and the lay people in the valley, who supported him with strong religious motivation. The ascetic, said Milarepa engaged in inner practice; the lay people, in outer practice. By dedicating their spiritual merit toward Enlightenment for the sake of all living beings, both together, in dependence upon each other, would indeed attain Enlightenment.