

Maintaining (the) Order

Conclusions

THE MONASTIC INSTITUTION AND TIBETAN SOCIETY IN AN AGE OF DECLINE

While this book focuses on Tibetan monasteries in pre-modern times, many issues or themes that are addressed here are widespread among Buddhist cultures. One of these is that—as we live in the *kaliyuga* (*snyigs dus*), the degenerate age—the Buddhist Teachings are seen to be in decline. In fact, over the course of history, Buddhists have always seen themselves as living in the degenerate age. Another important issue shared by many cultures that have monastic Buddhism is the notion that the Sangha—the community of monks and nuns—is the guardian and protector of the Buddhist Teachings. There are many Buddhist texts written in different times and places that contain a message similar to “as long as the Sangha remains, so will the Dharma.” The Tibetan monastic guidelines also motivate their audience to behave well, employing similar rhetoric. It is even suggested, among others in the 1918 *chayik* for Tengpoche, that keeping to the rules of (monastic) discipline could extend the Buddhist Teachings’ limited lifespan ever so slightly: “One should, solely motivated by the pure intention to be able to extend the precious Teachings of the Victor even a little bit in this time that is nearing the end of the five hundred [year period],¹ assume the responsibility to uphold one’s own discipline.”²

In the Mindröl Ling *chayik*, maintaining and protecting the Teachings of the Buddha and striving for the enlightenment of oneself and others were seen to depend upon whether individuals knew restraint based on pure moral discipline.³ Clearly, the Dharma and the Sangha were perceived to have a strong symbiotic relationship. While the two concepts mentioned above—that of the decline of

the Dharma and that of the Sangha's role as the custodian of the Teachings—no doubt greatly influenced Buddhist societies and their (notions of) social policy, the sources at hand only substantiate this for Tibetan societies.

Often, when speaking of one's social responsibilities in a Buddhist context, the finger is pointed to karma. It is seen as an explanatory model for the way a Buddhist society dealt, and still deals, with societal inequalities and injustices. Spiro sums up this view succinctly: "inequalities in power, wealth, and privilege are not inequities," as these inequalities are due to karma, and thus "represent the working of a moral law."⁴ While karma indeed works as an explanatory model for how things became the way they are now, it does not explain why things *stay* the way they are. In the context of Tibet, the limited degree of societal change throughout history is remarkable⁵ and the influence of monastic Buddhism on this phenomenon is great. Even today's monks are concerned with limiting change, as Gyatso remarks: "The principal task that monks set themselves is self-perpetuation of their traditions and the institutions that safeguard them."⁶ It can thus be argued that the monasteries were "extremely conservative" and that, while there was a pressing need to "adapt to the rapid changes of the twentieth century, religion and the monasteries played a major role in thwarting progress."⁷

The dominance or, in other words, the religious monopoly of the monasteries meant that they had—theoretically—the potential to use their organizational power and skills toward the development of things like education and healthcare accessible to all, poverty relief, and legal aid. However, history teaches us that the institutions which political scientists and others generally see as promoting social welfare were never established in Tibet.⁸ It is too simplistic to explain the urge for self-perpetuation and the lack of institutional social activism in terms of the greed and power that large corporations are often seen to display. Rather, I propose that the two very pervasive notions alluded to previously—that of the Dharma in decline and the Sangha as the protector of Buddhism—are much more nuanced explanations as to why certain things often stayed the way they were.

Connecting the decline of the Buddha's Teachings to a penchant toward conservatism is not new. Nattier suggests that the perspective that the Teachings will eventually and inevitably disappear from view "could lead to the viewpoint we actually find in much of South, Southeast, and Inner Asian Buddhism; namely, a fierce conservatism, devoted to the preservation for as long as possible of the Buddha's teachings in their original form."⁹ East Asia is excluded from this list, because, as Nattier argues, there the age of decline meant that one had to just try harder. Tibetan understandings of this notion are varied and have not been sufficiently explored, but generally they seem to vacillate between the idea that the Teachings *will* disappear and the belief that being in an age of decline means that being good is more challenging.¹⁰ Indeed, the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Pointing to the notion that we live in the age of decline (*kaliyuga*), which

makes life (and thus maintaining discipline) more difficult, or emphasizing the belief that the Dharma will one day not be accessible to us anymore, are pervasive tropes and even justifications in Tibetan culture, both in pre-modern texts and among contemporary Tibetan Buddhists, be they laypeople or monks.¹¹

Further contributing to the conservatism provoked by living in an age of decline is the monopoly position of Tibetan Buddhism. Throughout the documented history of Tibet, monks and monasteries have played dominant roles. They hardly ever had to compete with other religions or obstinate rulers. Not having any competition means not having to adapt or change. In that sense, Tibetan Mahāyāna monasticism is more akin to the monasticism of Theravāda countries such as Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka and less like that of Mahāyāna countries like China, Korea, and Japan, making the categories of Mahāyāna and Theravāda less meaningful when looking at monastic Buddhism in a comparative way. While this book only examines the Tibetan situation in some detail, it is likely that this theory explaining why societal change was rare, slow, or difficult is also applicable to most Buddhist societies where monasticism was widespread and where Buddhism had a monopoly position. It is for scholars of other types of Buddhism to test this theory.

MONASTIC GUIDELINES FOR AND AGAINST CHANGE

If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.

—TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA [1958] 2007: 19

The monastic guidelines presented in this book show the internal organization of the monastery: where to sit, what rituals to perform, who to appoint as monk official, and how to punish bad behavior. More importantly, these monastic guidelines convey the position of the monastery in society and its perceived role. The texts display a strong need for the monasteries to maintain their traditions. The changes that the monk authors implement in these texts are mostly geared toward the monastic institution remaining the same.

The guidelines show that the monastic authorities were willing to take measures that, in the modern day and age, appear at times rather harsh, politically incorrect, or even unjust. Some examples of these measures are given in this study: people from the lowest classes were sometimes barred from becoming monks, thereby preventing those classes from employing the monastery as a vehicle for social mobility. At other times, boys were levied from families as a sort of “monk tax.”¹² Often, monasteries gave out loans with rather high levels of interest (between ten and twenty percent), which in some cases caused families to be indebted for generations to come. Some monastic institutions permitted lay residents, who worked the monastic estates; in fact, the monasteries had the prerogative to make these people perform corvée labor on monastic grounds. In other instances, the

institutions were able to penalize the laity for not adhering to the rules that were in place on monastic territory.

The reasons for proposing or implementing these policies were clearly not primarily motivated by greed but by the urge for self-perpetuation and by adherence to the Vinaya rules. Still, the existing levels of inequality were often maintained and reinforced in this way.¹³ The close association of religion with the status quo is, of course, neither exclusively Tibetan nor Buddhist; it is a feature of organized religions all over the world. Martin Luther King, expressing his disappointment, famously remarked: "Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?"¹⁴

Throughout Tibet's recorded history, the dominant position of the monastery was rarely challenged openly by ordinary people. Is this because both monks and laypersons perceived the existing societal structures in place as just or justifiable? One can only hypothesize. In order to do that, we need to return to the two concepts mentioned earlier: the age of decline and the Sangha as the custodian of the Dharma. If the Dharma is in danger of decline and the members of the Sangha are the only ones who can safeguard it, is it not right that the monastery does everything in its power to continue itself, even if that means making sure that lower-class people do not become monks, because their presence in the community would deter potential upper-class benefactors and potentially upset local deities? Even if it means forcing boys to become monks when the monk population was seen to drop? Surely, desperate times call for desperate measures. And in the *kaliyuga*—the age of decline—times are almost always desperate. It appears that most, if not all, policy was ultimately focused on the preservation of the Sangha, which in actual practice translated to the maintenance of the monasteries that facilitated the monkhood.

Was this safeguarding of the Sangha seen as serving society as a whole? And if so, how? These are equally difficult questions to answer, because almost all Tibetan authors were products of Buddhist monasticism—alternative voices are hardly ever heard. We do know that—despite the fact that there was a degree of force and social pressure—the ordinary population has always willingly contributed to the continuation of the monkhood. Ultimately, even the simplest Tibetan farmer would be aware that Buddhism—in any form—contributed to his happiness and his prosperity. If the Sangha, then, was as pivotal in the upkeep of that vehicle of utility, ordinary people knew they could contribute by making sure that the Sangha survive the test of time. Thus, the monks were (and are) a field of merit (S. *punyaḥkṣetra*), not just because they enabled others to give—on the basis of which people could accumulate merit—but also because the monks perpetuated this very opportunity of accumulating merit. And monks maintained their status as a field of merit by upholding the Vinaya rules, their vows. This highlights the fact that, while it is often thought not to have had a clear societal function,

the Vinaya *did* impact Tibetan society, albeit implicitly. This makes the view that Tibetan monasticism existed solely to perpetuate itself one-sided, to say the least.¹⁵

Aside from being a field of merit, Tibetan monks were also involved in other ways to serve laypeople, namely by performing rituals to appease the many spirits that were seen to reside in Tibet and the Himalayas. These worldly deities wreaked havoc when angered and could cause untimely rains, hail, and earthquakes. Important here is that these spirits particularly disliked change. The author of the monastic guidelines for the whole of Sikkim, Sidkeong Tulku, who introduced many religious and economic reforms, met with an untimely death in 1914 at the age of thirty-four. A highly placed Sikkimese Buddhist related the account of his death to Charles Bell and explained this unfortunate event by saying that Sidkeong Tulku, at that time the Mahārāja of Sikkim, had angered the spirits by his new ideas, resulting in his passing.¹⁶

Spirits, often addressed as Dharma protectors but also occasionally as local protectors (*sa bdag*, *gzhi bdag*), feature prominently in the monastic guidelines. Often, in the closing lines of the monastic guidelines they are called upon to protect those who follow the rules set out in the work and to punish those who go against them, according to one work, “both financially and by miraculous means.”¹⁷ Some of the surviving scrolls containing the monastic guidelines depict the school’s or lineage’s most important protectors at the bottom.¹⁸ In this study I have argued that the spirits warranted the maintenance of traditions and purity in the monasteries. This is probably one of the reasons why some monasteries did not admit aspiring monks from the lower classes. To please the protector deities was to keep things as they were.

Again, the monks’ role in all of this was to preserve the balance, to maintain the status quo. And again, the preservation of the monastic vows was as important—if not more important—than performing the right kinds of rituals. A Bhutanese legal code, written in 1729, for example, presents a prophecy that says: “When the discipline of the Vinaya declines, vow-breakers fill the land / With that as its cause the happiness of beings will disappear.”¹⁹ Viewed in this light, lay Buddhists and monks both had a stake in the maintenance of the Vinaya and in the appeasement of the spirits.

Commenting on the situation in Ladakh in recent times, Mills remarks that “the tantric powers of a monastery which lacked firm discipline were occasionally questioned by laity.”²⁰ While the laity is clearly underrepresented in Tibetan sources, a number of scholars and travelers report on the spirits’ influence over the lives of ordinary Tibetans. Tucci notes: “The entire spiritual life of the Tibetan is defined by a permanent attitude of defence, by a constant effort to appease and propitiate the powers whom he fears.”²¹ Ekvall mentions the soil owners (*sa bdag*) as the spirits who exercised “the most tyrannical control over the activities of the average Tibetan.”²² This presented monks and laypeople with a common cause: to

preserve Buddhism at any cost, thereby maintaining equilibrium. This contrasts with Mills's contention with regard to Geluk monasticism that the monastery's religious and ritual authority is conceived of primarily in terms of "subjugation" or disciplining the surroundings, which—according to him—includes the laypeople.²³ In the light of information presented here, it appears more fitting to think of the monasteries' religious authority as geared toward *negotiation* rather than subjugation. The monks' role was to negotiate the spirits, the laypeople, and change in general. Monasteries did not only hold power and authority; they were also burdened with the responsibility of taking care of their surroundings.

Perhaps the Tibetan monastic institutions were, just like the early Benedictine monasteries, perceived as "living symbols of immutability in the midst of flux."²⁴ However, the overall reluctance to change did not mean that there was no change. To present past Tibetan societies as static would be ahistorical. Throughout this study, I have pointed out when the monastic guidelines indicate organizational and societal changes. At the same time, change—the focus of most contemporary historical research—has not been the main concern of this book. In this, I am in agreement with Dumont, who states: "The modern mind believes in change and is quite ready to exaggerate its extent."²⁵

The Tibetan situation echoes Welch's observations of the situation of Chinese Buddhist monasteries during the early twentieth century, noting that "the monastic system was always in the process of slight but steady change."²⁶ While slight change is more difficult to ascertain than widely reported historical events, no doubt detecting and understanding continuity has a greater effect on our understanding of any given society.

Miller has argued that many of the institutional roles commonly attributed to the monastic system in Tibet were not really inherent to it, but that it varied in accordance with the differing social, political, and economic contexts.²⁷ While these varying contexts have been remarked upon throughout this book, it needs to be noted that Miller's statement is not entirely correct. When looking at the monastic guidelines that are centuries and hundreds of miles apart, themes and roles that are shared in common can be distinguished. Possibly the most pervasive cause for this remarkable level of continuity and relative homogeneity throughout time and place highlighted here is the Vinaya that all monks in Tibetan societies share.

Summing up, I have argued that the perceived need to protect the Dharma in the age of decline has influenced Tibetan societies for centuries, resulting in a comparatively low level of social change. The general motivation to do so is, I believe, ultimately based on wanting the good for all members of society—all sentient beings. When trying to understand social phenomena in pre-modern Tibetan societies, one thus should never neglect the influence of religious practices and sentiments. It therefore does not make sense simply to reduce policy—be

it governmental or monastic policy—to being solely politically or economically motivated.

For Tibetan Buddhists, and it appears that this is also the case for many Buddhists elsewhere in Asia, what is seen as morally just—or in other words simply the right thing to do—is ultimately connected to what is believed to maximize the highest level of well-being. A question political scientists and philosophers have attempted to answer is whether a just society promotes the virtue of its citizens. The current view—endorsed by, among others, Rawls—is that a society should stimulate freedom, not virtue.²⁸ Based on the monastic guidelines, the Tibetan monastic understanding regarding this issue is that a just society *requires* virtue: the two, virtue and justice, cannot exist without each other. These are then seen to bring about the well-being of sentient beings. Of course, ritual service was an important contribution of the Tibetan monkhood to society, but rituals are only truly effective when the performers were sufficiently virtuous: that is, upholding their vows and precepts. While this book has not directly addressed the political implications of Tibetan monasticism, particularly from the mid-seventeenth century onward, the ritual role of the (Geluk) monks made government and administration subordinate to the Geluk hierarchy. Incoming taxes were spent on funding these rituals. This is because, as Schwieger asserts, “the prayers and ritual services of the Gelukpa monks were regarded as essential to the welfare of Tibet.”²⁹

In other words, to maintain the Dharma is to stimulate virtue and justice and thereby general well-being. The Sangha is charged with the important task of keeping the Dharma intact. Accordingly, while there can be no doubt that karma is a factor *implicitly*, the monastic authors of the sources at hand *explicitly* stress preserving the Dharma against the test of time as absolutely vital to bringing about the welfare of all.