

Gonpas (Monasteries): Monastic Ordination, Hierarchy and Administration in Ladakh

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Abstract

The present study seeks to analyse the monastic ordination, hierarchy and administration in the monasteries (Gonpas) of Ladakh. Not only spiritually, but also materially, the glory of Ladakhi Buddhism is undoubtedly the gonpas or monasteries that hold the Buddhist heritage alive. Ladakh renowned for its well preserved monasteries and spiritual traditions played an important yet diverse role in keeping alive culture, education, religion and knowledge in the Himalayan region. The organisation and function of monastic communities deserve particular attention not because monasteries are highly respected and fruitful centres but also because of the fact that the entire social and cultural history of Ladakh has been and is being dominated by the monasteries. Endeavour will be made to examine the monastic life, organisation and maintenance, and the complementary roles it played towards the society.

Introduction

The Buddhist monastery has been a central feature of the Buddhist tradition since the early development of Buddhism. According to Robert James Miller "any unit where in

there is a resident body of monks will be called monastery".¹ In the traditional chronicles of Tibet and Ladakh, Buddhist monastery, commonly known as *gonpa*, refers to a solitary place or hermitage. According to the course of *Shakya Muni* (Buddha) it is primarily built far away from the crowded place of a town or a village which is suitable for solitude and meditation. The finest and well represented buildings in the country are, therefore, monasteries, usually built on the verge of heights, more or less lofty, and generally have a picturesque and a commanding manifestation.²

Monasteries in Ladakh can be broadly categorized into:

- I. Early period monasteries between ninth to twelfth century AD and
- II. Later period monasteries from twelfth century onwards.

The early reference to the foundation of religious buildings in the region primarily emanates from the famous Buddhist translator, *Lotsava Rinchenbzangpo* of eleventh century who was an early chief architect of the spread of Buddhism in Tibet, and who according to the source built for the king of Ladakh no fewer than 108 *gonpas* (monasteries) and 108 *mchodrtens* (stupas) from Mount Kailash to Zojila. Some of the monasteries of his time still exist in Ladakh such as Alchi, Sumdo, Mangyu. A majority of the monasteries seems to have flourished between twelfth and eighteenth centuries at the time when region enjoyed an independent kingdom. All the successive kings of Ladakh during these periods had earned the title *Dharmaraja*.³

Out of the two main schools of Buddhism, Hinayana and Mahayana, the latter is dominant in Ladakh. The monasteries of Ladakh on lines of those of Tibet fall under

the four major Buddhist orders or sects- namely *Nyingma*, *Sakya*, *Kargyud* and *Gelug*. The earlier orders of Tibetan Buddhism began to develop quite spontaneously around the traditions associated with certain revered masters, but with no deliberate doctrinal or practical differences. A group of monasteries with a common organisation form one monastic order or sect. Each order acknowledges one master as a founder and an interpreter of its doctrines. However, it is yet not likely to justify here as to which order or sect a majority of the people of Ladakh adhere to. Suffice is to say that such divisions are not strictly maintained and they have been participating in each other's festivities harmoniously through the ages.

MONASTIC ORDINATION

It was a traditional practice in every Buddhist household to dedicate a younger son or daughter to the monastery to which his or her family owed allegiance. However, exceptions were made in case the son's or daughter's presence was imperative at home and he or she was the lone member to sustain progeny. The former, traditional

customs like fraternal polyandry, inheritance pattern (wherein only the eldest son inherited the estate) prevalent in the region due to its geographical adversities and limited job opportunities may have encouraged the monastic institution. As the surplus of children were then dedicated to the monasteries as monks and nuns. Ippolito Desideri (1932) explains, "As such there is no definite age for taking the habit, but generally prefer to admit small children of four or five years of age into the monasteries in order to accustom them to the life from early years and induce them to study, partly because their avaricious parents are glad to be quit of the son or daughter destined for a religious life, and to some extent from superstition".⁴

A distinctive feature of Buddhism was the monastic system of life prescribed for a monk or a nun in which he or she observes some 203 vows, including that of celibacy and also conforms to a rigorous discipline. The boys' or girls' head is shaved and he or she passes through several stages of monkhood before attaining the highest stage

in the Sangha.⁵ According to the Buddhist belief, humanity falls naturally into two groups: the *Nang pa*, and *Phyid pa*. *Nang pa*, refer to the disciples of the Law of the Buddha, while *Phyid pa* are those who do not follow the Buddha's word. Among the *Nang pa*, however, two further groups can be distinguished: on the one hand the *dgebsnyen* (Sanskrit. *upasaka*), refer to the adherents for whom only the first five among the ten precepts are obligatory i.e.

- 1) Not to kill;
- 2) Not to steal;
- 3) Not to live unchastely;
- 4) Not to lie;
- 5) Not to drink any intoxicating beverages,

And on the other hand the *dgetshul* (Sanskrit. *Sramanera*) refers to the novices, the bearers of the lower consecrations, and the *dgeslong* (Skt. *bikshu*) refers to the ordained mendicant monks, who have to fulfil all the ten precepts, the additional five being as under:

- 1) Not to eat at a time when it is not permitted;

- 2) Not to take part in dance, song, music, theatrical spectacles;
- 3) Not to use any garlands, perfumes or adornments;
- 4) Not to sleep on a high or large bed;
- 5) Not to receive gold or silver.⁶

MONASTIC HIERARCHY AND ADMINISTRATION

Monasteries being the pivot of religious life, nearly every village in Ladakh has a monastery of a greater or a smaller size depending upon the status and strength of its residential *lamas*(monks). However, the only variation is that the greater monastic institutions possess a large number of *lamas*. Each with smaller size in almost all villages of Ladakh possesses only a few *lamas*.⁷ According to SonamJoldan (2006), monasteries in Ladakh can be categorized into three levels. These are the village level, medium and the major monasteries. Each Buddhist village in Ladakh has a village

level monastery (mini *Lhakang*) few such monasteries are attached to medium monasteries and are in turn linked with a major monastery. Each of the major monasteries in Ladakh is thus supported by nearby villages affiliated to it.⁸

The monasteries in Ladakh, virtually, gives the impression of a state in itself with its own kind of vertical (hierarchical) and horizontal divisions to manage its affairs effectively. The appointment of an ordained monk to the various offices of a monastery is remarkably a democratic system. The collective assembly of monks usually governs the monastery, which meets frequently to deliberate on the problems, to make policy and to appoint officers. According to John Crook and TseringShakya, "the system drives from the code of governance in the *Vinaya*: the earliest regulation of a community".

In most of the major monasteries of Ladakh, an incarnate *lama* often known as *Kushok* or *tulku*, occupies the highest position. The *Kushok* enjoys the courtesy title, *Rinpoche* (precious jewel) who is often regarded as

Bodhisattva⁹ (would be Buddha) chiefly attending to the spiritual matters. They devote their time in looking after education and training of the monks in the monastery and are required to perform rituals, organise religious festivals, and conduct religious congregations. The basic tenet of Buddhism describes acclims *kushok* as follows:

A *Kushok* after his death is reborn only as a *Kushok* because he has attained nirvana and enjoys freedom from cycle of life and death. When a *Kushok* dies, it becomes the top priority of the concerned monastery as to discover his new incarnation. The *Kushoks* like the other monks too have to live a life of celibates, they can have no heirs.¹⁰

In the same manner *Sogyal Rinpoche* (1993) also elucidates, “Those who master the law of karma and achieve realization can choose to return in life after death to help others. In Tibet a tradition of recognizing such incarnations (*tulkus*) began in the thirteenth century and continues till the present day.

When a realized master dies, he (or she) may leave precise indications of where he will be reborn. One of his closest disciples or spiritual friends may then have a vision or dream foretelling his imminent rebirth. In some cases his former disciples might approach a master known and revered for having the ability to recognize *tulkus*, and this master might have a dream or vision that would enable him to direct the search for the *tulku*. When a child is found, it will be this master who authenticates him”.¹¹

In this connection E F Knight (1985) contends that, when one of these is about to die, he calls around him his disciples, and tells them where he will be reborn and what will be the circumstances of the re-birth. As soon as he is dead, the disciples repair to the place he has indicated and search for a newly-born child who bears the sacred marks, indicative of the most probable incarnation of the departed saint. Having found the child, they leave him with his mother till he is four years old. When a child is grown enough to communicate, he brings forth his previous memoirs leaving proof of child's recognition as the incarnate. The

disciples do return, after four years bringing with them a quantity of prayer books, rosaries, praying-wheels, bells, and other priestly articles, among which are those that belonged to the late incarnation. Then the child has to prove that he is the new incarnation by recognising the property that was his, in his previous existence, and by relating reminiscences of his past. If he is successful in this, as is nearly always the case, he is acknowledged as the *kushok*, and is carried off for ever from his home and family, to be educated in the sacred mysteries, first in the *gonpa* of which he is to head, and afterwards, for some years, in the sacred city of Lhasa. He then returns to his own *gonpa*, therein to take up his residence in a separate building, not busying himself with the worldly affairs of the brotherhood, but dreaming away the long, quiet years until the time comes for him again to die, and take rebirth be re-born in another earthly body. All those who know this country best affirm that *kushok* and *lamas*, as well as the people, have an absolute belief in this strange theory of metempsychosis, and that even the selection of the property of the late *kushok* by the child is not due to collusion or trickery—at any rate, of a conscious sort.

But the Ladakhis have a magnificent capacity for belief.¹²

The chief purpose of this tradition serves in ensuring that the wisdom memory of realized master is not lost. The most important feature of the life of an incarnate is that in the course of training, his or her original nature—the wisdom memory of the incarnate has been inherited—awakens, and this is the true sign of his or her authenticity. For instance, the Dalai Lama admits, “he was able to understand at an early age, without much difficulty, aspects of Buddhist philosophy and teaching that are difficult to grasp, and which usually take many years to master”. However, the question is, is the *tulku* exactly the same person as the figure he reincarnates? He is not actually the same person, but his motivation and dedication to help all beings remains same. It’s a blessing, which continues from life to life. Perhaps the most moving example of the richness, effectiveness, and subtlety of this system is the Dalai Lama often revered by Buddhists as the incarnation of Avalokiteshwara, the Buddha of infinite Compassion. Born and brought up in Tibet, the Dalai Lama

received all the traditional training and major teachings of all the lineages, and become the greatest living master in Tibetan tradition.¹³

Therefore, the *Rinpoches* being the most celebrated personality is placed at apex of monastic order while the other elected officers among the community of monks carrying out the regular activities and administration inside the monastery occupy lower ranks. Following are various categories of monastic administrative ranks in Ladakh:

- I. *Kushok (KuShok)* = Abbot
- II. *Lobon (slob dpon)* = Teacher
- III. *Umzat (dbumdzad)* = Master of Ceremonies
- IV. *Uchung (dbuchung)* = Deputy Master of Ceremonies
- V. *Gesko (dgebskos)* = Disciplinarian
- VI. *Chagzot (phyagmdzod)* = Treasurer

The above category of officials carries out the daily activities of the monastery and implements the decisions taken by the entire monkhood. The first five positions in the administrative hierarchy usually manage the

religious and spiritual work of the monastery. *Gesko (dgebskos)*, the disciplinarian attends to all correspondence, observes that the rules are absolutely obeyed, and superintends punishment.¹⁴ The treasurer *Chagzot*, organizes and manages all the secular tasks of the monastery, especially the economic tasks. He collects revenue, lends money, keeps accounts and conducts all other economic affairs of the monastery. Moreover, the opinion of older monks are often given due consideration in the major decisions of the entire monkhood. Thus, every senior monk has a wide experience of the offices work and monastic affairs. Occasionally, the advice of head *lamas* is often sought by the government on some important and subtle matters. Though the participation of religion in politics gave a righteous administration to the Ladakhis, yet simultaneously it stood in the way of progress and reform.¹⁵

Appointments of the *lamas* to the said offices are generally made on the basis of merit and aptitude. Although each office has fixed duration, the incumbent may resign or sometimes get an extension, subject to the

general approval of the assembly of monks of the monastery. Usually the officers are appointed for a period of two or three years, depending upon the particular monastery. One can also be re-elected to the same post for more years and also get elected to various other posts in the monastery. The priesthood among them is not hereditary, but forms a distinct community, the priests being recruited from the regular ranks. They are supposed to observe a vow of celibacy and renounce the pleasures of sense.¹⁶

It is pertinent to mention here that, during the performance of liturgies in the main assembly hall, each monk has to take his position in a row of sitting arrangement according to his educational qualifications and the rank of office and the seniority wise. The *Gesko*, disciplinarian usually sits near the entrance facing the shrine, and can thus observe everybody. The discipline forced upon the priests for offenses against the disciplinary code regularly comprises of gentle expiatory assignments, for example, clearing of the sanctuary, or in making the blameworthy individual remain outside the situated lines of priests in the custom

activity. A less exacting control holds for those priests (*rgyabsdod dad*) who have declined compulsory in living in the cloister and are not bolstered by it.

MANAGEMENT OF MONASTERIES

The life within the monastery no doubt is being supported in several ways, by manufacturing and selling goods- often agricultural products; by donations or alms; by rental or investment incomes; and by funds from other organizations. There has been a long tradition of monasteries providing hospitable and charitable services. The income of the monastery is utilized to support the religious community especially during the important performance of monastic rituals and a reserve is kept for the repair and renovation of its buildings.

Until Ladakh was opened to tourism in 1974, the maintenance of the monasteries appeared to have become a problem as it was highly dependent upon the donations given by local villagers and religious visitors. Much of income of the monastery was then procured mainly in the form of kind articles such as wheat, barley, barley flour and butter from its donors and devotees.

With the coming of the tourists in the region monetary transaction gradually overpowered former barter system. Now tourists' fees have begun to generate a useful income in cash for the monasteries as some major monasteries have the museum enclosed within them and the hoardings and collection of art and articles inside them are of immense archival value.

In order to preserve the rich cultural heritage of these monasteries, the world heritage authorities have also recently announced to take control of the monasteries. Besides, some cultural forums and higher government officials, such as the cultural department under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India look after the construction and renovation of the buildings, preservation of art and paintings possessed inside them. The local and non-local visitors who often visit the monasteries continue to help in the upkeep of the monastery as usual.

Monasteries have long been sharing an interdependent relationship with their communities. In fact, this interaction is an important part of Buddhist tradition. The duty of Buddhist monks or nuns is primarily spiritual; however, the monks and the nuns

also serve their community in a more hands-on capacity, by teaching, guiding and assisting common people. They have a significant role in the socio-religious activity of the region or community concerned. The way people are connected with the monasteries and governed by the dictates of the *lamas* assumes a great significance. The *lamas* perform rituals and prayers for devotees at the monasteries as well as their respective homes. In return village folks cater service to the particular monastery by assisting in its agricultural pursuits and other constructive works. Sometimes people also give donations and sponsor the monastic rituals in order to gain merit for their family. That is how the relationship between the monasteries and the village communities is considered as that of a central pillar for keeping alive the rich Buddhist culture and religious traditions in the Himalayas.

CONCLUSION The change noticed in the past few years regarding the monastic population of the monasteries in Ladakh is thought provoking. There was a time when the monastic population outnumbered the householders. But under the present changed

socio-economic conditions there is no longer total reliance on the system. In fact some of the existing monasteries by and large are starved of novices. Still the monasteries continue to form an integral part of the religio-cultural mosaic in the social and religious life of people. Monasteries presently left to cater to the religio-spiritual needs of the people have been strong and continues to. With the government recognition of monasteries as historically and religiously important place, the management of monasteries have become easy and simple.

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⁶ Tucci, Giuseppe, *op. cit.*, p.111.

⁷ Drew, Frederic, *The Jammu and Kashmir Territories*, Oriental Publishers, Delhi, 1971, p. 254.

⁸ Joldan, Sonam, 'Traditional Ties between Ladakh and Buddhist Tibet: Monastic Organization and Monastic Education as a Sustaining Factor', *The Tibet Journal*, Vol.31, No. 2, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala, 2006, p. 69

⁹ *Bodhisattvas* are beings who have attained enlightenment but have refused to accept *nirvana*; they choose to reincarnate so that they can help release sentient beings caught in the cycle of suffering and rebirth. The *Bodhisattvas* will not accept the reward of *nirvana* till all beings have been led to enlightenment.

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