The Monastery Rules: Buddhist Monastic Organization in Pre-modern TIbet

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9. MAINTAINING (THE) ORDER: CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Monastic Institution and Tibetan Society in an Age of Decline

This study has a focus on Tibetan monasticism in pre-modern times. Many issues or themes that are addressed here are, however, 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. Of course, over the course of history Buddhists have always seen themselves as living in an age of decline. Another important issue that many cultures that have monastic Buddhism share is the notion that the Sangha, the community of monks and nuns is the guardian, the protector of the Buddhist Teachings. There are many Buddhist texts written in different times and places that could be cited, which 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 bca' yig 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],[1396] take the responsibility to uphold one's own discipline.[1397]

In the Mindröl ling bca' yig, 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.[1398] Clearly, the Dharma and the Sangha were perceived to have a strong symbiotic relationship. While I am convinced that 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 – in fact greatly influenced Buddhist societies and their notions of social policy and justice, the sources at hand only substantiate this for the case of Tibetan societies.

Often, when speaking of justice or social justice 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 [..]'[1399] 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

[1396] Nattier notes the various mentions of this five hundred year period in different sūtras. She questions the translation 'the last five hundred years' given by Conze for *paścimāyāṃ pañcaśatyāṃ*, which appears in the *Vajracchedikā-sūtra*, arguing that *paścima* can also mean 'that which follows'. See Nattier, 1991: 33-7. In Tibetan this word, usually rendered *tha ma* (or alternatively *mtha' ma*), definitely means 'last' or 'the end'. When the whole phrase (*dus*) *lnga brgya mtha' ma*, which features widely in the *bKa' 'gyur*, is mentioned in later Tibetan texts, it most definitely points to the last five hundred year period or to the end of a five hundred year period.

[1397] *sTeng po che bca' yig*: 464/6b: *lnga brgya mtha' mar nye ba'i dus 'dir rgyal ba'i bstan pa rin po che cung zad tsam re yang bsrings thub pa'i lhag bsam kho nas kun nas bslangs te/ rang khrims theg pa khur len bya zhing/*

[1398] *sMin sgrol gling bca' yig*: 274,5: *rgyal ba'i bstan pa 'dzin skyong dang/ rang gzhan mtha' dag gi mthar thug gi 'bras bu don du gnyer dgos pa kho na'o/ de gnyis ka'ang gzhi tshil khrims rnam par dag pas yongs su bsdams pa'i gang zag la rag lus par* [..]

[1399] Spiro, 1971: 439.

context of Tibet, the limited degree of societal change throughout history is remarkable[1400] and the influence of monastic Buddhism on this phenomenon is great, as Gyatso remarks: 'The principle task that monks set themselves is self-perpetuation of their traditions and the institutions that safeguard them.'[1401] It can 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.'[1402]

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 towards the development of things like education and healthcare accessible to all, poverty relief, and legal aid. However, history teaches us that the institutions that political scientists and others generally see as promoting social justice were never established in Tibet.[1403] 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 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 Teachings to a penchant toward conservatism is not new. Nattier suggests that the perspective that the Teachings will once 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.'[1404] 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 not sufficiently researched, but generally they seem to vacillate between the idea that the Teachings *will* disappear and the belief that being in an age of decline meant that being good was more challenging.[1405] 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 lay-people or monks.[1406]

Further contributing to the conservatism induced 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

[1400] Only aristocrats are known to have tried to implement major societal changes. The sole attempt at a revolution – i.e. changing the system and not the people in charge – was masterminded by an aristocrat in 1933. See Goldstein, 1973: 455.
[1401] Gyatso, 2003: 237.
[1402] cf. Goldstein, 1989b: 37.
[1403] This is not the same as saying that there was no social justice in pre-modern Tibet. My research has shown that on an institutional level there were no policies promoting issues of social justice in place, but that on an individual level people generally took good care of each other.
[1404] Nattier, 1991: 136, 7.
[1405] Gyatso also points out this notion regarding contemporary Tibetan monasticism in exile: 'Standards in discipline are perceived to have slipped. But this is perceived to be indicative of a more general "natural" process of corruption.' Gyatso, 2003: 235, 6.
[1406] There is no consensus in Buddhist canonical texts on the finality of this decline. See Nattier, 1991: 223. On the whole, however, in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition there is the understanding that the Teachings will merely *appear* to disappear.

competition means one does not have 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 the 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 only the Tibetan situation has been examined 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.[1407]

The monastic guidelines presented in this study 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 behaviour. 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 would take measures that, in the current day and age, could appear at times rather harsh or perhaps 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.' Often monasteries gave out loans against rather high levels of interest (between ten and twenty per cent), which in some cases caused families to be indebted for generations to come. Some monastic institutions contained lay-residents, who worked their monastic estates. The monasteries had the prerogative to have these people perform corvée labour on monastic grounds. In other instances, the institutions were able to penalize the laity for not adhering to the rules in place on monastic territory.

While I have argued that the reasons for proposing or implementing these policies were not primarily motivated by greed but by the urge for self-perpetuation and by the adherence to the Vinaya rules, at the same time, the existing levels of inequality were often maintained and enforced in this way.[1408] 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 with the Church, famously remarked: 'Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?'[1409]

Throughout the recorded history of Tibet, the dominant position of the monastery was hardly ever openly challenged by ordinary people. Is this because, both monks and lay-persons perceived the societal structures in place as just? One can only hypothesize. In order to do that we need to return to the two concepts mentioned

[1407] Tomasi di Lampedusa, 2007 [1958]: 19.
[1408] According to Goldstein, 'almost all the elements in the ruling elite had crucial vested interests in maintaining the basic status quo.' See Goldstein, 1968: 254. Naturally, this ruling elite also included the aristocracy. The relationships and networks between the two types of 'elite' are in need of further research.
[1409] King, 1964: 96.

before: 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 that 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 focussed on the preservation of the Sangha, which in 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 (*bsod nams kyi zhing*, S. *punyakṣetra*), not just because they allowed others to give – on the basis of which people could accumulate merit – but also because the monks perpetuated this very opportunity of accumulating merit. The way monks maintained their status as fields of merit was 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.[1410]

Aside from being a field of merit, Tibetan monks were also involved in other ways to serve lay-people, namely by performing rituals to appease the many spirits that were seen to reside in Tibet and the Himalayas. These worldly deities would wreak 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, Srid skyong sprul sku, 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 Srid skyong sprul sku, at that time the Mahārāja of Sikkim, had angered the spirits by his new ideas, resulting in his passing.[1411]

Spirits, often addressed as Dharma-protectors but also occasionally as local protectors (*sa bdag*, *gzhi bdag*), also feature prominently in the monastic guidelines. Often in the closing lines of the bca' yig they are called upon to protect those who follow the rules set out in the work and to punish those who go against them,

[1410] Goldstein views the reasons for the monasteries' opposition to change in ideologies of a more materialist kind: 'Furthermore, the mass monk ideology and the annual cycle of prayer festivals led the monasteries continually to seek more land and endowments and vigorously to oppose any attempt on the part of the government to decrease their revenues. It also made them advocates of the serf-estate economic system and, thus, extremely conservative.' Goldstein, 1989b: 37. I have called the ideology of mass monasticism into question elsewhere, see Jansen 2013a.
[1411] Bell, 1931: 20.

according to one work, 'both financially and by miraculous means.'[1412] Some of the surviving scrolls containing the monastic guidelines depict the school's or lineage's most important protectors at the bottom.[1413] It has been suggested in this study 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 Vinaya 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.[1414]

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.'[1415] While the laity is clearly underrepresented in Tibetan sources, a number of scholars and travellers report the hold the spirits had on the life 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.'[1416] Ekvall mentions the soil-owners (*sa bdag*) as the spirits who exercised 'the most tyrannical control over the activities of the average Tibetan.'[1417] This presented monks and lay-people with a common cause: to preserve Buddhism at any cost, thereby maintaining equilibrium. This contrasts with Mills' contention with regard to Gelug 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 lay-people.[1418] In the light of the information presented here, it appears less problematic to think of the monasteries' religious authority as geared toward *negotiation* rather than subjugation. The monks' role was to negotiate the spirits, the lay-people, and change in general. Monasteries did not just have power and authority; they were also burdened with the responsibility to take 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.'[1419] 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 research. In this, I am in agreement

[1412] e.g. *'Chi med grub pa'i byang chub gling bca' yig*: 655: *mngon mtshan can gyi rtags dang 'cho 'phrul gyis tshar gcod pa dang/* Also see *Pha bong kha bca' yig*: 244; *'O chu dgon bca' yig*: 178; *Sho mdo dga' ldan bshad sgrub gling bca' yig*: 528, and *dPal yul dar thang bca' yig*: 201.
[1413] For a picture of such a bca' yig, see http://www.aaoarts.com/asie/VDL/ (viewed 17-11-2014).
[1414] Translation is after Aris, 1986: 138 (107a): *'dul khrims nyams pas dam nyams lung pa gang/ de yi rgyu las skye 'gro'i bde skyid nub/*
[1415] Mills, 2003: 317.
[1416] Tucci, 1988 [1970]: 187.
[1417] Ekvall, 1964: 79.
[1418] Mills, 2003: 330.
[1419] Southern, 1970: 29.

with Dumont who states: 'The modern mind believes in change and is quite ready to exaggerate its extent.'[1420]

The Tibetan situation echoes Welch's observations of the situation of Chinese Buddhist monasteries during the early 20th century: 'the monastic system was always in the process of slight but steady change.'[1421] While slight change is more difficult to ascertain, 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.[1422] While these varying contexts have been remarked upon throughout this study, it needs to be noted that Miller's statement is not entirely correct. When looking at the monastic guidelines, 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 Tibet share.

To sum 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. While the question of whether pre-modern monasteries promoted social justice should remain unanswered,[1423] I invite the reader to consider the information this study provides in the light of the parameters for social justice set out by Palmer and Burgess:

> Social justice concerns [..] include beliefs and practices by which peoples and individual persons express concern for weak and vulnerable members of the community; sustain the community; treat each other fairly; resolve disputes and grievances; distribute community resources; uphold the dignity of the human person; promote peaceful interaction; enhance political or economic participation in the community; or encourage a sense of stewardship for the natural world.[1424]

When trying to understand issues of social justice or, more broadly, social phenomena in pre-modern Tibetan societies, one can never neglect the influence of religious practices and sentiments. It is therefore not good to simply 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 socially just – or in other words simply the right thing to do – is ultimately connected to what is believed to

[1420] Dumont, 1980: 218.
[1421] Welch, 1967: 107.
[1422] Miller, 1958: viii.
[1423] The question of whether monasteries were just is an even more contentious one. In this regard, Hayek notes that only human conduct can be perceived as just or unjust: 'If we apply the terms to a state of affairs, they have meaning only in so far as we hold someone responsible for bringing it about or allowing it to come about. A bare fact, or a state of affairs which nobody can change, may be good or bad, but not just or unjust. To apply the term "just" to circumstances other than human actions or the rules governing them is a category mistake.' Hayek, 1976: 31.
[1424] Palmer and Burgess, 2012: 3.

maximize the highest level of utility or 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.[1425] 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. To maintain the Dharma is to stimulate virtue and justice and thus 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 authors of the sources at hand *explicitly* mention preserving the Dharma against the test of times as absolutely vital in bringing about the welfare of all.

[1425] See for example Sandel, 2009: 9.