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CONTENTS

I. ARTICLES

II. BOOK REVIEWS

Pre-Buddhist Elements in Himalayan Buddhism: The Institution of Oracles

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I

During a span of time extending over thirteen centuries Buddhism has come to acquire a distinct form in the vast region comprised by the Tibetan plateau and the highlands around the Himalayas. Since these regions are dominated by Tibetan culture and civilization this distinct variety of Buddhism is most often known as Tibetan Buddhism. Here it has to be kept in mind that when the term "Tibetan" is used in the context of religion or culture it signifies something far wider and deeper than the limited and changing connotations of the term when it is used as the designation of a specific country.[1] Perhaps to avoid any possible misunderstanding it is better to call this distinct variety of Buddhism "Himalayan Buddhism". In fact, some leading scholars of Buddhism, whose main interest lies in the Buddhism practiced in both the cis-Himalayan and trans-Himalayan regions, have already started using the term Himalayan Buddhism.[2]

One of the distinguishing features of Himalayan Buddhism is that it has accommodated within itself a good number of elements and traits of the pre-Buddhist indigenous religions and folk traditions. This is such an important feature that hardly any modern scholar studying one or the other aspects of Buddhism in Tibet and the related areas has failed to take note of it. In view of the ever growing interest in Himalayan Buddhism, and with the increasing volume of knowledge about the culture and religion of that area, a stage has now been reached which demands deeper and more detailed investigations of the symbiotic interlinkages between the non-Buddhist and pre-Buddhist

religions and culture on the one hand, and Mahāyāna Buddhism on the other. Such investigations can go a long way towards finding answers to various pertinent questions. Some such questions are: What prompted the propagators of Buddhism in the Tibetan or Himalayan regions to integrate the elements of the indigenous and folk traditions into the Buddhist tradition? Could they not avoid it? Did such integration or adaptation violate the basic principles of Buddhism? What methods and strategies were evolved for the selection and adaptation of the pre-Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements? Did the Buddhist tradition contain any doctrinal sanction for making such additions and changes? Satisfactory answers to such questions can be arrived at if detailed and in-depth studies of those traits and elements of Himalayan Buddhism which are of pre-Buddhist or non-Buddhist origins are carried out. There are many such traits, and the tradition of oracles is one among them. With its ubiquity and popularity, it has lent uniqueness to Buddhism in the Himalayan regions. The present paper seeks to throw some light on the institution of oracles associated with Himalayan Buddhism. While trying to understand the phenomenon of oracles within the broader framework of the Buddhist tradition, this analysis also employs the concepts of the Little and the Great traditions. These twin concepts have been used by contemporary anthropologists and sociologists to interpret social and cultural changes. In our opinion certain concepts of modern social science, like the concepts of the Little and the Great traditions which are being used here, can prove to be of some value, howsoever limited that may be, in unravelling the patterns of inter-relation and interaction between Buddhism and different national cultures.

II

Various approaches have been developed by contemporary social scientists to analyse the changes resulting from encounters and contacts between different cultures and traditions.[3] One such approach is based on the concepts of the Little and the Great traditions referred to above. This approach was formulated by Robert Redfield in the course of his studies of Mexican society. Later it was applied to the study of social changes in

Indian society.[4] No doubt this approach has its limitations, yet it offers a framework which may prove useful in the analysis and comparison of various processes and sub-processes of cultural change. Hence, in the present context, if used with caution, that approach can be of some help in understanding the nature and the consequences of the cultural encounter between Buddhism and the folk and indigenous religious traditions in Tibet and other Himalayan areas.

According to Redfield, the cultural structure of a civilization is constituted by two traditions, viz. the Little tradition and the Great tradition. Though these two traditions are distinct from each other, they are nevertheless interdependent and interrelated. These two traditions correspond to two levels of the social structure of a civilization. One of these levels is constituted by the general masses of the common people, whereas the other is comprised of the elite, particularly the cultural elite of a society. Accordingly, what is known as the Little tradition is the ensemble of the notions, ideas, beliefs and practices prevalent among the general mass of people, most of whom are unlettered and unsophisticated. It is primarily an oral and local tradition. It is sustained and carried by such specialists as the bards and folk poets, folk singers, folk artists, healers and medicine men, shamanistic practitioners, reciters of fables, stories, tales and riddles. As distinct from this, the Great tradition or the culture of the elite of a society, is primarily a literate tradition and, unlike the Little tradition, has the potentiality to extend its frontiers beyond local limits and to acquire wider dimensions. Prophets and seers, men of literature and art, religious leaders, philosophers, scholars, priests and the like are the creators and carriers of the Great tradition.

The Little-Great tradition approach takes an evolutionary view of the changes in a civilization. It assumes that any civilization, comprising both the social structure and the cultural structure, develops in two ways. First, it may grow through orthogenetic changes or, in other words, it may grow by itself without the intervening influence of any outside culture or society. Secondly, the growth may be due to heterogenetic factors, i.e., through contacts and encounters with other cultures and societies. In most cases, civilizations grow through the simultaneous operation of both the orthogenetic and heterogenetic factors. However, in a particular period one can discern the dominance of

certain of these factors over others. In this context it may also be noted that, generally with the passage of time heterogenetic changes tend to become dominant. Recorded history shows that most of the major changes have resulted from encounters between different cultures and civilizations.

Looking at Tibetan civilization from the above angle, it is amply clear that its contacts and encounters with the civilizations of China and India from time to time have induced major changes in it. The most distinguishing feature of Tibetan civilization is the highly developed and deeply rooted religious and cultural tradition of Mahāyāna, which had earlier originated and flowered in India as a Great tradition. The Great tradition reached and struck roots in Tibet through the herculean joint efforts of the Indian and Tibetan religious, cultural and political elites. Before the introduction of Mahāyāna Buddhism, religious life in Tibet was, by and large, made up of primitive or folk religions comprising supernatural beliefs and myths, magic, shamanistic practices, songs, music, riddles, proverbs, legends, stories, etc. Of course, there was the Bon religion, the pre-Buddhist *lha-chos* or "religion of the gods". It was an organised religion with its integrated system of beliefs and rituals. Its tradition of priesthood was well developed.[5] Nevertheless the pre-Buddhist Bon religion was so full of folk and shamanistic beliefs and practices that many early students of Tibetan culture and religion failed to make a clear distinction between *mi-chos*, the religion of men, or folk religion, and *lha-chos*, the religion of the gods or organised and developed religion. Thus to a large extent the pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion was shamanistic and folkish. It did not develop a literate tradition of its own and it was more or less localised. It possessed all the characteristics of a Little tradition. As the facts stand, it can be well surmised that when the Mahāyāna Great tradition reached the trans-Himalayan plateau and highlands it encountered a powerful religious Little tradition. That encounter resulted in the development and flowering of an entirely new form of culture and civilization.

It is true that with the support of a talented, resourceful and powerful elite the Mahāyāna tradition succeeded in entrenching itself, but it could never completely replace the indigenous Little tradition which was embedded deep in the Tibetan

psyche. The ways of thinking of a people are shaped by the milieu, which is made up of various layers of culture. Some of the deepest layers of this milieu are rooted in the Little tradition and are of unknown origin. Hence, when a Great tradition moves on to new regions dominated by a Little tradition, the former is constrained to come to terms with the latter. Time and again this has happened in the cultural history of different races and peoples. The Vedic or the Brahmanic Great tradition could not have gained ascendency in the Indian sub-continent if it had not adopted various traits and elements of the existing primitive and folk traditions. Similarly, in the course of their proselytizing task in Europe, the early Christian missionaries had to adopt various elements of paganism. They adopted, in one form or the other, pagan festivals and accorded recognition to several figures from the pagan pantheon.

The process of interaction between the Little and Great tradition is an extremely complex affair. During the course of their encounter they clash and complete, merge and mingle and adopt and adapt each other's traits. Generally the interaction between the two traditions moves in either of the two directions—universalisation or parochialisation. Universalisation is the process by which elements of a Little tradition, e.g., deities, rituals, festivals, beliefs and customs are adopted and legitimised by the interacting Great tradition. Parochialisation is just the reverse process, by which the elements of a Great tradition are adapted by the Little tradition concerned.[6] When one closely examines the features of Himalayan Buddhism, it becomes evident that during the course of its development the process of universalisation came to the fore. Most of the gods and demons, rites and customs, fairs and festivals, dance and music, etc., which give distinctness to Tibetan or Himalayan Buddhism originally belonged to the indigenous Little tradition. There is no doubt that in the course of the encounter between the two traditions the Mahāyāna Great tradition must have evolved its own strategies and methods for the adoption and appropriation of the elements of the Little tradition. It is not easy to find out in what manner the elements of the indigenous tradition or traditions were adopted and which methods were evolved for it by the Mahāyāna tradition. It is hoped that detailed studies of the pre-Buddhist indigenous elements which are present, in

one form or other, in Himalayan Buddhism will help in arriving at a better understanding of the phenomenon under question. It is in this context that the institution of oracles, as found in Himalayan Buddhism, has been chosen for analysis. Of course, all aspects of this institution cannot be analysed here. However, it is hoped that the analysis presented here will not only throw some light on the nature of the Tibetan institution of oracles but will also give some idea as to how the Mahāyāna, a Great tradition, followed the process of universalisation and what strategies were adopted by it to achieve the consolidation of its position.

III

The institution of oracles is one of the oldest cultural institutions in the world. Ethnographic and historical accounts relating to primitive and ancient cultures reveal that this institution has existed, in one form or the other, in all parts of the globe. The ancient Greek oracle, the Delphic Pythia, is perhaps the best known oracle in human history. As in all other societies, the institution of oracles is also of great antiquity in Tibetan society. Commonly known as *chos-skyong* or *cho-rgyal*, or sometimes also as *chos-rje*, the oracles definitely antedate Buddhism, which was introduced in Tibet in the seventh century during the reign of the great king Tsongsten Gampo. Scholars generally believe that the Tibetan institution of oracles has close affinities with the shamanism of Central and Arctic Asia. Without going into the question of its connection with shamanism, it can be said that this institution has always been very much a part of the Bon religion, the organised pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet. At the same time it was also part and parcel of the folk religious traditions which were very powerful and had their independent existence. Thus, the institution of oracles was already very popular in Tibet and the adjoining areas long before the introduction of Buddhism. It is generally held that the institution was carried over to Buddhism from the Bon religion.[7]

The institution of oracles was so pervasive in Tibetan society and it had such a strong hold on the minds of the people that the early propagators of Buddhism in Tibet prudently followed

the policy of giving due recognition to it. In this context, it must be noted that the historic role of the legendary Padmasambhava, better known as Guru Rimpoche in the Himalayan regions, has no parallels. With his charismatic power and consummate skill he singlehandedly universalised an extremely large number of figures, customs and other elements of the existing indigenous little tradition and thus enlarged and enriched the great tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism. He is said to have subdued and won over innumerable local deities and demons. These also included the oracular deities. For instance, it is believed that Guru Rimpoche himself had installed the oracles at the Samye monastery, the first Buddhist monastery of Tibet.[8] The hold of the institution of oracles was so powerful that even Tsong Khapa, the great reformer of Tibetan Buddhism, accorded recognition, howsoever tacit it may be, to it. The great Fifth Dalai Lama not only gave formal recognition of the Samye oracle but went a step further by establishing Nechung as the official oracle.[9] Since then, the Oracle of Nechung has occupied the foremost place among Tibetan oracles.[10] Of course, apart from the Nechung and Samye oracles there are other major oracles in Tibet, like the oracles of Karmasar, Gahdong and Tsang Karpo.

An oracle is considered to be the divine revelation of some deity who invariably manifests itself through a human medium. These deities are known as *chos-skyong*, protectors of the faith. The popular Tibetan name for them is *chos-rje*. On particular occasions the chosen mediums enter into a state of trance after performing various rituals in the prescribed manner. After undergoing the tedium of rituals, at the appointed hour they lose consciousness and go into trance. In the state of trance the ego of the medium is blotted out and they are so transformed that their voices become the voices of the deity. The body of the medium becomes the "body support," *sku-rten*, of the deity. In a state of trance they answer questions asked by those who consult them. They also make general pronouncements and prophecies.

A close examination of the oracles associated with various Himalayan or Tibetan monasteries reveals a systematic pattern of methods and techniques through which the Mahāyāna Great tradition adopted and legitimised the institution of oracles. The legitimisation of the institution of oracles implied that it should

be integrated into the general structure of beliefs and practices of the Mahāyāna. This integration was achieved by adopting the following three methods or techniques: (A) the oracular deities were given due recognition through their inclusion in the Tibetan pantheon; (B) the monastic communities were associated directly with the oracles (this was done by assuring that the oracular mediums would be chosen from among the regular monks); (C) the monasteries gave oracles a prominent place in their respective annual calendars of religious events, particularly those events in which the participation of the laity is significant. Almost all the rituals and festivals connected with the recognised oracles are regularly held in the monasteries. To illustrate how these methods and techniques were adopted in pursuance of the process of universalisation of the institution of oracles a concrete example is taken up here. It concerns the oracle of *Rongsten Karmar*, the annual oracle of the Mangto monastery of Ladakh.[11]

IV

The Mangto monastery of Ladakh is known far and wide for two reasons. First it is the only monastery of the Sakya sect in Ladakh. Secondly, the oracle of *Rongsten Karmar*, the most famous oracle in Ladakh, is associated with it. The annual oracle has its elaborate schedule of rites and ceremonies which are performed together over a span of several weeks sometime in the spring of every year. The mediums through whom the oracle is manifested in the course of the performance of the rites and ceremonies occasionally perform most extraordinary feats—like piercing their bodies with sharp swords and yet remaining unhurt, or running furiously along the high cornices and the top of the very high walls of the monastery, which stands on a dangerous precipice—feats which are witnessed by thousands of awe-struck people. The oracle attracts people in very large numbers from all over Ladakh.[12]

The history of the oracle of Rongsten Karmar in Ladakh is as old as that of the Mangto monastery itself. The monastery was established in the early fifteenth century, during the reign of the Ladkhi king Dragpa Bumde, by Dorji Palsang, the famous

Sakya lama from the Kham region of Tibet. This lama was a great *vajrācārya* or Tantra master, and when he undertook his journey to Ladakh, he was accompanied by two Dharmapāla brothers known as Kar and Mar. The Tibetan word *dKar* means "white", whereas *dmar* means "red." These two deities are also known as *rgyal-po'i* and *bla-ma'i*, respectively. It is believed that originally the *dharmapāla*, protector deities, were brothers who belonged to a place called Rongsten Khawa Karpo in Kham. These protectors are said to have been brought into the Buddhist fold by no less a figure than Padmasambhava himself. In due course they got attached to the Tantra master Dorji Palsang and it was natural that when he decided to go to Ladakh both the protector deities followed him. Later, when Dorji Palsang established the monastery at Mangto, he directed the *dharmapāla* brothers to become its special protectors. It is these two protector deities who annually manifest themselves through two mediums chosen from among the senior monks of the Mangto monastery. The annual festival involving the oracle has been continued undisrupted since the time of Lama Dorji Palsang.

The two human mediums of the oracular deities are selected every five years by a random method from among the senior members of the monk community of Mangto monastery. The selection takes place once in five years on the fifteenth day of the tenth month of the Tibetan calendar. While the selection process is in progress the Sangha performs the well known *Mahākāla Pūjā*. After their selection the two monks prepare themselves thoroughly for their assigned roles according to the elaborate schedule laid down by tradition. To begin with, they have to remain more or less in seclusion for one year. After the completion of the prolonged seclusion they enter into a period of strict retreat beginning from the *Parinirvāṇa* Day of Sakya Pandita. This period extends from the fourteenth day of the eleventh month to the sixth day of the first month of the Tibetan calendar. Apart from performing various rituals they have to propitiate a host of deities during this period. Among these deities the most important is *Hevajra*, the chief Tantric deity of the Sakya sect. As sacrificial offering, *tormas*, are offered to the *dharmapālas* in general and to *Rongsten Karmar* in particular.

As the period of strict retreat ends, the monk-mediums assume the actual roles of the *Rongsten Karmar* oracles by enter-

ing into a state of trance. Beginning with the tenth day of the Tibetan first month they go into trance every day till the fifteenth day. Throughout the long period of the annual Mangto festival the oracles enter into a state of trance for seven days in all—for six days in the first month and one day in the second month of the Tibetan calendar. On the first day of trance, after paying visits to the *Chisa* shrine of Mahākāla, the oracles give audience to people and make predictions about the coming events in Ladakh for the ensuing year. Later, when they are still in trance, they select four persons from among the people collected there to fetch stacks of a shrub called *shukpa* from Himi Sukpachen, a place far away in the valley. The stacks of shukpa shrub brought by the chosen men are later used to rebuild the shrine of the *Rongsten Karmar* deities. With the selection of the four men the trance state comes to an end for the day. The following day, i.e., on the eleventh day of the Tibetan calendar, both the monk-mediums go into trance and after performing their routine rituals visit the main *dukhang* or shrine of the monastery. Then they send invitations through special messengers to all the leading Kushoks and Rinpoches of Ladakh requesting them to witness the ceremonies to be held on the fourteenth day. On the following two days, i.e., on the twelfth and the thirteenth, they again enter into trance and make predictions about the personal problems and questions of the people who come to them in large numbers. The fourteenth day is more significant. On that day after entering into trance the oracles perform *Cham* or the ritual dance in the presence of a large gathering which includes the important Kushoks of Ladakh and the royal guests from Stok. As the *Rongsten Karmar* deities assume their fierce role on this day, other deities and demons participating in the *Cham* observe maximum care while performing their respective roles. Even a minor lapse on their part may invite the wrath of the oracular deities.

The most significant day of the annual festival is the fifteenth of the first month of the Tibetan calendar. After the ritual bath the oracular deities take their seats and get ready to be decorated as *Panjarnāth Mahākāla*. The wrathful face of *Panjarnāth Mahakālā* is drawn and painted on their backs and chests. On that day they do not wear anything on their bodies except tiger skins loosely wrapped round their waists and loins. They

get themselves adorned with bone ornaments and bracelet-like mini-relic boxes which are said to have been offered long ago by a queen of Ladakh. Each of the oracles holds a small *damaru* or hand-drum in one hand and a tiny bell in the other. To cap it all, they cover their faces with fierce masks that do not have openings for eyes. As these masks cover their heads and faces they become completely blind-folded. It is believed that the custom of wearing the blind-folding mask was started in the remote past by a queen who tried to test the powers of the twin oracles.

The elaborate ritualistic adornment, which is completed with meticulous care, signifies that on that day the oracular deities personify the *prajñā* of *Panjarnāth Mahākāla.* After being fully adorned, led by the *vajrāchārya* or Vajra-master of the monastery, the two oracles perform special rituals. Later, while visiting the main shrine they hold above their heads the robe-relic of Dorji Palsang, the founder of the monastery. After receiving blessings from the *vajrāchārya* in the shrine they pay visits to several major and minor shrines located within the precincts of the sprawling monastery. These included the two shrines of Mahākāla—one of them being the *Gonkhang* and the other known as *Jurkhang* or *Kalon-Gonkhang.* On their way to these shrines they meet people who gather there by the hundreds waiting to get blessings as well as answers to their individual questions from the oracular deities. However, the most spectacular event of the fifteenth day is the awe-inspiring and highly risky race undertaken by the masked and blindfolded oracles along the top of the high walls of the courtyard and the steep edges of the roofs of the monastery. It is believed that on that day the blindfolded oracles see through the eyes of the wrathful *Panjarnāth Mahākāla* drawn on their backs and chests. This event is witnessed by several thousand men and women drawn from all over Ladakh. During the course of the display of their supernatural powers the deities sometimes inflict cuts and wounds on their faces and other parts of their bodies with sharp weapons. However, to their wonder, later on, people do not find any trace of the wounds or scars on the faces or bodies of the oracles. Such unbelievable actions and related events make the people marvel at the super-human powers of the oracular deities.

Undoubtedly, the traditional faith of the Ladakhi people

in the *Rongsten Karmar* deities is strengthened anew through the rare actions which are performed not only with great devotion but also with extreme precision and expertise year after year. After visiting all the places and shrines the oracles reach the monastery courtyard and scatter *samchhod*—a mixture of barley flour and *chhang*, the local beer—in all four directions. It is believed that the amount of *samchhod* falling in a particular direction signifies the success or failure of the next crop in Ladakh. The ceremonies of the fifteenth day come to a close with special prayers offered by the deities for the flowering and consolidation of the *Saddharma* in the region. With this the day-long trance also comes to an end.

The last day of the annual festival of Mangto falls on the eighth day of the second Tibetan month. It is also the seventh and final day of trance. On that day horses and their attendants from the Hemis Gonpa, the biggest monastery in Ladakh, as well as those sent by the ex-ruler of the Tokpa kingdom, arrive in Mangto early in the morning. After their arrival the oracle deities take their daily ritual bath and offer prayers at various shrines. Accompanied by the horses and their attendants and some other people, they later leave the monastery for their permanent abode in the upper part of the Mangto Valley where a freshly rebuilt shrine of shukpa shrubs is ready for them. It is to be recalled that the shrubs used in reconstructing the shrine are brought from a far off place known as Himi Sukpachen by four persons selected by the oracles on the very first day of their trance. On their way to the shrub-shrine they again enter into a state of trance. Then they mount the horses in that state. On reaching the shrine they perform certain prescribed rituals and offer prayers. In the end they once again make predictions about the success or failure of future crops and about the general welfare of the Ladakhi people. They make predictions by examining the grains taken from a pot placed inside the shrub-shrine. This marks the end of the trance. The final curtain is drawn over the long annual ceremonies. The oracular deities leave the bodies of the monk-mediums and retire to the empty stillness of the shrub-shrine located in the upper part of the Mangto Valley under the shadow of snow-capped peaks. From then on the deeply religious people of Ladakh once again wait patiently till next spring for the reappearance of *Rongsten Karmar*.

V

In order to find out the way in which the oracle of *Rongsten Karmar*, which undoubtedly is of pre-Buddhist and non-Buddhist origins, was integrated into the Mahāyāna tradition, it would be fruitful to analyse some of its salient features. This may help us to understand and appreciate the symbiotic interlinkages between the Mayāyāna Great tradition and the pre-Buddhist Little tradition. Let us examine these features in brief.

(1)The oracular deities known as *Rongsten Karmar* of Mangto did not belong to the original Indian Mahāyāna pantheon. They were indigenous Tibetan deities, most probably of Bon origin. After their induction into the Buddhist fold by Guru Rimpoche they were accommodated in the Tibetan Mahāyāna pantheon. If not for other monasteries in Ladakh and elsewhere, their institutionalisation as recognised deities had become necessary for the distinctiveness and the stability of the monastic and religious system of the Mangto monastery. Thus, in the pantheon they were accorded the status of *mGon-po* or *dharmapālas*, the protective deities of the shrines and monasteries. In the Tibetan Mahāyāna pantheon the protector deities are placed below the Tantric deities like Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, Vairocana and Tārā, most of whom are of Indian origin. In this pantheon there are two types of protective deities, viz. the deities of Indian origin and those having their origins in the indigenous Tibetan religious tradition. It is noteworthy that, generally, the protective deities of Tibetan origin are not given the same significance which is accorded to similar deities of Indian origin. This is reflected in the fact that *Rongsten Karmar* deities of Mangto are placed below Mahākāla, the ubiquitous *dharmapāla* of Tibetan monasteries, who is of Indian origin. During the ritual ceremonies associated with the Mangto Oracle the human medium through whom the *Rongsten Karmar* manifest themselves have not only to worship Hevajra, the chief Tantric deity of the Sakya sect, but have also to pay obeisance to Mahākāla.

Through their inclusion in the pantheon these indigenous oracular deities were given due recognition by the Great tradition of Mahāyāna. However, this inclusion did not affect either the basic tenets of Mahāyāna nor the spiritual or Tantric practices associated with it. In this way, the Buddhist strategy of

universalisation appears to have had two aims before it: (i) to give due recognition to the powerful local deities, and, (ii) to take care that their inclusion in the pantheon did not affect the basic structure of Mahāyāna tradition. As far as the case of the oracle of *Rongsten Karmar* is concerned, there is no doubt that the Buddhist strategy was immensely successful.

(2)As the *Rongsten Karmar* were institutionalized as the protective deities of the Mangto monastery by its founder Dorji Palsang, it was natural that the monastic community had to be closely associated with the oracle. The closeness of this association can be appreciated when we take note of two facts: (a) two senior monks of the monastery are chosen to become the mediums for the *Rongsten Karmar*; (b) all the rituals, ceremonies and performances connected with the annual oracle are organised and controlled by the *dge-'dun* or the Sangha of the monastery. It is also noteworthy that most of the activities and ceremonies are held within the monastery precincts.

Before assuming the role of the oracle, both of the monks chosen for the job strictly observe specifically prescribed ritualistic rules and enter into meditation retreat. This prepares them for the role of the oracle. During the course of this preparation the monks give central importance to the rituals relating to the propitiation of Hevajra, the chief tantric deity of the Sakya sect. In this way we find that, on the one hand, the monks act as the medium of the oracular deities, and, on the other hand, perform their role as Sakya Gelongs or monks. If one examines the role of these monks it becomes clear that they simultaneously become bearers of two traditions, viz. the indigenous Little tradition and the Mahāyāna Great tradition. However, to avoid any misunderstanding, it must be added that although as oracles they may act as the bearers of the Little tradition, their basic roles and primary identity belong to the Great tradition. Inasmuch as the Mahāyāna tradition has incorporated the institution of oracles within itself, and not the other way round, it can be observed that the preeminence of the Great tradition is never in jeopardy. All the rituals performed by the monk-mediums are Mahāyānist or Tantric in nature. In this connection it is noteworthy that during the preparatory period every day they have to seek and receive the blessings of the *vajrācārya,* the Tantra master of the monastery. Thus, it can be noted that although the oracle of

the *Rongsten Karmar* has become an inseparable part of the institutional and ritualistic structure of the Mangto monastery, it has in no way adversely affected either the principles and practices of the Mahāyāna tradition or the monastic discipline of the monastery.

(3) The social significance of the annual oracle of the *Rongsten Karmar* can hardly be understated. It acts as a direct link between the masses and the monastery. It provides an occasion to bring the people closer to the monastery. Time and again the religious hold and prestige of the monastery and its monastic order is reinforced and reaffirmed through the massive participation of the people in the ceremonies and festivities relating to the oracle. Here it has to be kept in mind that the monastery and the people are organically linked to each other. On the one hand, the very survival of the monastic community rests on the support of the laymen and, on the other hand, the monastery provides great solace and assurance to the people. Though the lamas belonging to the monastery lead a cloistered life and are free from the troubles and responsibilities of the worldly life of a householder, still they are obliged to maintain viable links with the larger community which provides them all the moral and material support they need. Perhaps for a Mahāyānist monk the maintenance of such links has an additional significance. If he upholds the *bodhisattva* ideal he will have to come closer to the people. Without getting close to the people he can hardly do anything for the alleviation of their suffering. With a complete sense of detachment he, in his own way, helps the people to face the vicissitudes of life. In so far as the oracle draws masses to the monastery and its monks and provides solace to the people in distress it is in accordance with the ideals of the Mahāyāna. Every year people in thousands from all over Ladakh visit the Mangto Monastery and get answers to their questions from the oracle of the *Rongsten Karmar*. The questions are concerned with all sorts of anxieties and problems relating to physical and mental health, family, economic well being, social prestige and the like. The oracle makes forecasts relating not only to personal or domestic problems but also to problems that concern the entire community. They predict what favourable or unfavourable events will occur in Ladakh in the coming year, which area will have better or worse crops

and what lies in store for the people of Ladakh in general. Undoubtedly the oracle plays an important role both for the individual and the community. People not only get answers to their questions but they also get solace and assurance by the very presence of the oracular deities.

In this context it has to be noted that in its institutional form a religion fulfills various expectations of the people. Spiro holds that three types of desires—cognitive, expressive and substantive—are met by religion.[13] Of these three the substantive desires are most common and overt and have a greater positive connotation. The desire for prosperity and well being, the desire for sound health and protection from illness, and the desire for social prestige or power are examples of substantive desires. Such desires are very real for most people. If we examine the role of the Mangto oracle from the point of view of the substantive desires of the people there is no doubt that the oracle plays a role for which there can be no substitute whatsoever.

VI

The foregoing analysis of the Mangto oracle illustrates how the Mahāyāna Great tradition absorbed the elements of the indigenous Tibetan Little tradition into itself. The inclusion of the oracular deities known as *Rongsten Karmar* can be seen as a concrete example of the process of universalisation adopted by the early Buddhist sages, siddhas and monk-scholars in Tibet. The importance of Padmasambhava and his place in the religious and cultural history of Tibet and adjoining areas can be appreciated in this context. He was the grand initiator and the greatest charismatic practitioner of the art needed for the universalisation of the elements of the Little tradition.

At this juncture some questions, already referred to in the first part of this paper, invariably come up. How far was it necessary to follow the policy of universalisation? Did Buddhism not compromise its principles by incorporating almost indiscriminately a large number of the elements of the indigenous Little tradition? Did Buddhism not lose much of its purity by acquiring various traits of Bon, shamanism and folk religions in Tibet? Is there anything in Buddhist doctrine and tradition

which approves of the process of universalisation? It is not easy for anyone to provide final answers to these questions. Nevertheless, it is in the fitness of things that an attempt is made here to place such questions not only within the socio-cultural framework in which Buddhism was placed in and around Tibet, but also within the broader framework of the Mahāyāna tradition itself.

Many scholars believe that Tibetan Buddhism has incorporated such a large number of non-buddhistic elements that the basic tenets and original purity of Buddhism has been sacrificed and magical and shamanistic traits have gained an upper hand.[14] If such an understanding of Tibetan Buddhism is to be accepted one is faced with one basic question. Which form of Buddhism is to be called the true one? In this context it should not be forgotten that the picture of Buddhism which can be gained from the reading of Buddhist texts will always be different from the Buddhism in actual practice. Perhaps one cannot name a single Buddhist country where all the rules of the *Vinaya* were faithfully observed by the monks in the past or are being observed at present. Similarly, can one actually find anywhere such ideal *upāsakas* or *upāsikās* as are often described in the Pali literature? As a matter of fact, when the issue under consideration is viewed in the right perspective two major points emerge. Firstly, one observes that the proverbial lag between precept and practice exists under all circumstances. Secondly, it becomes evident that the limitations imposed by space and time on the one hand and society and culture on the other, very much affect the content and form of the institutionalised aspect of religion.

It can well be surmised that there can be as many forms of Buddhism as there are national cultures in the world. The variations in the institutional and cultural forms of Buddhism are easily noticeable even among the countries professing the same school of Buddhism. Complete uniformity in matters of religion is to be found neither among countries professing Theravāda nor among those where Mahāyāna is professed. It is well known that Buddhism is preeminently a religion of monks, but it is also a fact that the traditional Buddhism among the Newars of Nepal is known as "Buddhism without monks". Keeping the socio-cultural diversities and the spatio-temporal factors in view one can say that each and every form of Buddhism is 'real' or

'true' in so far as it upholds the basic tenets of Buddhism and unequivocally adheres to its ultimate ideals. Any society or community, irrespective of its historical and cultural background, is to be treated as Buddhist if its members have faith in the basic principles of Buddhism and believe that the attainment of buddhahood—whether it aims at attaining arhathood or *sarvajñatvā*, i.e., omniscience—is the highest *puruṣārtha* or the ultimate goal of man. If due to geographical, social, cultural and historical variations people give a particular shape to the institutional and ritualistic structure of Buddhism it does not mean that they are not real Buddhists. The foregoing analysis has shown that the inclusion of the *Rongsten Karmar* deities in the Tibetan pantheon has in no way compromised the principles of Mahāyāna. As a matter of fact, in the form of the *Rongsten Karmar* the Mangto monastery only added two popular and powerful deities to the array of the protective deities. This addition has not in any way proved detrimental to the ideals and principles of the Mahāyāna.

Finally, let us see whether the policy of universalisation is in accordance with the Buddhist tradition. Is there anything in Buddhist doctrine which gives sanction to such a policy or strategy? From the Mahāyānist viewpoint teachings, philosophical concepts, logic, rituals, meditation and the like are meaningful in so far as they are helpful in the attainment of buddhahood. All these belong to the domain of *saṃvṛti-satya* or the "conventional truth." *Paramārtha-satya* ot "ultimate truth" is not only unutterable and unthinkable, but it is also unteachable. One cannot speak about it, it can only be experienced. As the attainment of buddhahood is the highest ideal of the *bodhisattvācārya* in Mahāyāna, all beings are considered to be identical with Buddha. The *bodhisattva* considers the salvation of all sentient beings as his own good and this explains why he chooses to toil for the salvation of even the lowliest of beings. To attain this end, any method is correct and proper provided it does not go against the basic tenets of the *Saddharma*. Nāgārjuna says, "Buddhas have taught with a purpose the reality of the 'I' and the 'mine', as indeed have they the doctrine of the groups, elements and the bases."[15] For the salvation of all sentient beings the votary of the ideal of *bodhisattva* can use his own discretion in the choice of proper means. Let us again quote the great Nāgārjuna, who says, "As the occasion required, the Buddha has af-

firmed the self or denied it, both affirmed and denied, or done neither."[16] According to the Madhyamika doctrine there is no limit to the number and nature of the devices that may be used by a person for leading others to the ultimate truth.[17] However, to search out and utilise any means appropriate for the attainment of the goal is not easy. It requires excellence, excellence in the choice of appropriate methods. This is nothing but *upāyakauśalya*, i.e., choosing the right methods and means suited to the needs, temperament and disposition of the beings in question. It is like prescribing and administering the right medicine at the right moment to a sick person. The Buddha was the greatest practitioner of this excellence. That is why he is called the greatest healer or the most skilled physician. *Upāyakauśalya* occupies such a major place in the Mahāyāna tradition that it is accorded the status of a *paramitā*, the highest perfection. *Upāyakauśalya* is one of the ten *paramitās*.[18]

If *upāyakauśalya* or the excellence in the choice of appropriate means and methods is very much part of the Mahāyāna tradition then it is evident that the strategy of universalisation adopted and perfected by the pioneer Buddhist sages, monks and scholars—both Indian and Tibetan—in the vast Himalayan regions in no way violated the tenets of Buddhism. The founding fathers and consolidators of Buddhism in these regions evolved such unique strategies of universalisation that they could easily accommodate those elements of the indigenous religious traditions which were well embedded in the social and cultural structures and were rooted deep in the Tibetan psyche. Here one is reminded of Candrakīrti who says that no beneficiary of the *Saddharma* should be offended in any way. His likes and dislikes must be respected. Lord Buddha himself attached great significance to the accepted ways of the common folk. In one of his sayings he declares, "Whatever is *lokasammata* is acceptable to me. How can I accept anything which is not *lokasammata*". It is also in this context that the relevance of the classification of the Buddhist texts into *neyārtha* and *nītārtha* becomes evident. The former are the texts which speak of 'means' and the latter are those which speak of the ultimate end.

Thus, if one views the Mangto oracle of Ladakh in this light it is evident the elimination of the *Rongsten Karmar* deities was neither feasible nor necessary. For ages, the masses in Tibet

and the adjoining areas had deep faith in such deities. As such they were part and parcel of the indigenous cultural structure. They were the deities of the people. If Buddhism was to strike deep roots in the Tibetan highlands or the Himalayan regions it was incumbent upon its propagators to give due recognition to the social and cultural realities. There is no doubt that the *upāyakauśalya* of Mahāyāna Tantric Siddhas and *ācāryas*, Indian and Tibetan both, has no parallels in the history of Buddhism. The form of Buddhism prevalent in the Himalayan regions is as much a tribute to their ingenuity as to their unshaken and deep faith in the lofty ideal of the *bodhisattva*.

NOTES

1. The term "Tibetan" employed in this paper does not denote the political and administrative territory known as Tibet. It refers to Tibetan civilization and culture which in the past surely had Tibet proper as its centre. This cultural region has fairly wide dimensions and cuts across various national and political boundaries. The term "Tibetan Civilization" has a broader connotation. It should be treated on par with other similar terms such as "Chinese Civilization", "Indian Civilization", "Hellenic Civilization," etc.

2. D.L. Snellgrove is one of such leading scholars. He has used the term 'Buddhist Himalaya' for the Buddhist regions around the Himalayas. The very title of one of his books is *Buddhist Himalaya*.

3. In our opinion none of these approaches provides a completely satisfactory framework to interpret and understand the complex processes of cultural and social change. At best, each one of them can be of some help in the understanding of some aspects of those processes.

4. See R. Redfield, "The Social Organisation of Tradition," *Far Eastern Quarterly* 15 (1955-56). See also M. Singer, "The Cultural Pattern of Indian Civilization," *Far Eastern Quarterly*, 15 (1955-56).

5. See D.L. Snellgrove, *Nine Ways of Bon*, London, 1967.

6. See M. Marriot, "Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization," in *Village India: Studies in Little Communities*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.

7. H.R.H. Prince of Greece and Denmark, "Tibetan Oracles," in *Himalayan Anthropology*, J.F. Fisher, (ed.), The Hague: Monton Publishers, 1978, p. 288.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. The Nechung Oracle is also known as the State Oracle of Tibet. The Dalai Lama himself consults it whenever certain important decisions have to be taken. The oracle of Nechung came to India along with the present Dalai Lama.

11. The basic information about the Oracle of *Rongsten Karmar* was gathered by the author in 1979 when he visited Ladakh as a member of the Himalayan Cultural Survey Team led by Prof. Jagannath Upadhyaya. The author is extremely grateful to Venerable Ludin Khen Rimpoche, the head of the Mangto monastery, for kindly providing details about the oracle. The author is also thankful to Sri Jamyang Gyaltshan, an assistant professor at the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Choglamsar (Leh), Ladakh, for his kind cooperation in giving relevant information about the oracle. Some additional information was also gathered later when the author paid two short visits to Ladakh in 1983 and 1984. The author also records his gratefulness to Ven. S. Rimpoche, Principal, Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath (Varanasi), who was kind enough to give the benefit of his knowledge about Tibetan oracles.

12. A detailed account of the Mangto Oracle is contained in the paper presented by the author at the All India Seminar organised by the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Choglamsar (Leh), Ladakh in August, 1984. The title of the paper is "Himalaya Main Bauddha Dharma Thatha Puratan Dharmik-Sanskritic Paramparayen".

13. M.E. Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (ed.) M. Banton, (A.S.A. Monographs 3), London, Tavistock, 1966, pp. 109-117.

14. Scholars like L.A. Waddel, H. Hoffman and F.W. Ranke hold such a view. They often use the term 'Lamaism' for Tibetan Buddhism. The usual connotation of this term more often than not gives a distorted picture of Buddhism in Tibet and the adjoining Himalayan regions. For instance, Waddel says that, "Lamaism has descended to the level of gross devil-dancing and Shamanistic charlatanism and plays upon the easy credulity of the people by the profitable pursuits of necromancy and sorcery." See L. Waddell, *Buddhism and Lamaism of Tibet,* reprinted New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1974.

15. See T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, Second Edition, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960, p. 247.

16. Nāgārjuna, *Madhyamakashastram*, XVIII, 6, Mithila Vidyapeeth, Darbhanga, 1960, p. 152.

17. Murti, ibid, p. 246.

18. It is noteworthy that 'Upāyakauśalya Parivarta' is the title of one of the chapters of *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* or the Lotus Sūtra, the most important of all the *Vaipulyasūtras.*