

1.1 Introduction

In Sikkim I wondered why Tibetan Buddhists use the same ritual devices as Roman Catholics. I puzzled over mountains that are living gods. Confusion turned to excitement when I began to feel I was in a world not shaped by aggression. How did that culture develop? What inspires the omnipresent deities and demons? Does Buddhism in fact drive this way of life? Then in Nepal I found people who are "*sort of Buddhist but sacrifice chickens.*" Buddhists who cherish all sentient beings sacrificing animals? That was too much. I barraged John with questions to which he responded: "*Well, this is Nepal*". Boundaries on maps suggest cultures are separate. In fact, they interpenetrate. Himalayan geography led to isolated hill communities that traded for survival with farmers of the Gangetic plain and nomads of the high Tibetan plateau. Their age-old animistic beliefs that animals and plants, thunder and earthquakes, mountains and rivers are spiritual beings blended with Hinduism from India and Buddhism from Tibet. This chapter examines the origins of Himalayan beliefs and practices.

1.2 Animism and Shamanism

Animism came first, the belief that all animate beings and many inanimate things have a spirit and the visible world is pervaded by these invisible spirits whose forces affect us all. Mountains, lakes, rivers and forests throughout the Himalayas and Siberian steppes have spirits that govern and can protect creatures. They understand human speech and respond with goodwill to appropriate offerings. It is wise to propitiate and dangerous to annoy them. In many cultures fire has a spirit. In some the fire spirit is an old woman whose movements can be seen in the flames. The Tuvan people of southern Siberia held feasts where the family fire was fed a lamb or calf so it would reciprocate with health and happiness for the family. Throwing a piece of one's meal to the fire is common throughout the Himalayas. While the movements of the sun and moon have universal and unalterable impact, the actions of fire-spirits and spirits of place can be influenced by suitably sensitive people.

Shamans have special abilities to cooperate with spirits to benefit or harm their community. The Turkic word shaman, '*he or she who knows*', meant a healer in Siberia and Mongolia. The Chinese '*sha men*' for a Buddhist monk seems to originate from Sanskrit '*sramana*' meaning an ascetic, which likely also came from the Turkic root. Shamans have specialized knowledge like monks or priests with but do not study for an institutional position. They have personal power. It originates sometimes from an ancestor, occasionally from a lightning strike or other external shock and usually from a psychological crisis. The power is harnessed by meditation, song, dance and drum. Tuvan throat singing seems to be the prototype for Tibetan Buddhist chanting. Animals often bring messages, especially bears, wolves, hares, geese, eagles and owls. The unique ability of shamans is soul-flight. Many of us have flown randomly in dreams. A shaman's spirit goes on well defined journeys outside their body to guide the spirit of a sick or deceased person to safety.

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1.3 Mun

The religion of Sikkim's Lepchas is named for its shamans, the Mun, who use animal sacrifices to ward off devils and make prophecies when possessed by a spirit. Mun teaches that all the dead are reborn to eternal life. Sinful acts during life cause others in their family to die or suffer grievously¹. Like other shamans Mun work alongside everyone else and have no special position. There are Tang-li Mun who are good and Mun-mook Mun who are bad. The type of Mun a shaman becomes depends on their teacher. A shaman can call on benevolent, malevolent or neutral spirits. Gorer writes: *'the best way to deal with devils is to flatter them by treating them as gods, and whether gods or devils are prayed to the ceremony always ends by begging them vehemently to go away'*². "The Mun creative mother had a male and female child who married and had children. Because incest is a great sin their children were born as devils, snakes and lizards. At last a normal child was born but it was killed by the devils. The parents then separated. The man took all the jewels and animals to Tibet, the woman went with nothing to Sikkim. That is why Sikkim is poor today.

A tiny snail shell on a bracelet is given to new Lepcha babies. That is because their soul goes wandering when they sleep and it can only move slowly. If it is pursued by a demon it may not have time to reenter the body but it can crawl into the shell where the evil spirit can't follow. The souls of old people are also feeble but they need not hide because they are too tough for devils to eat. The soul only separates from the body in waking hours if there's a violent accident. If a man falls from a tree his soul will try to separate from his body to get down safely then return to his body. The body will revive if the soul can reenter its house³. If it falls with the body and the body dies it, too, will be killed. Dead Lepchas never return benevolently. Old people don't want to come back. Young ones always return as vengeful devils.

Some spirits are always good, some are always bad (they are especially active at night). Most respond to how they're treated. In Sikkim one's body is beset by spirits. One sits under the armpits and must be worshiped for long life, one lives over the heart and is worshipped for wealth, one on the crown of one's head can bring fame, and one on the right shoulder can protect against enemies. He's worshiped most by soldiers but there used to be a general taboo about touching another person's right shoulder to avoid annoying their enemy-protection spirit. Many people now walk with arms round each other's shoulders. There were good and bad spirits who sat on one's shoulders prompting good and bad deeds. There are spirits to be worshiped at specific seasons the chief of whom are Kanchenjunga, *'protector of religion'* and God of the North, and Yabbud, *'Black Father Devil'* also known as Yadup, God of the South. Both of them used to require sacrifice of life but they are now honored by ceremonial dance. Yabbud preferred an ox but allowed poor people to substitute a chicken. Kanchenjunga also liked beef. He may at one time have demanded human flesh.

¹ Gorer writes: *'The education of Lepchas from their earliest childhood stresses social approval and disapproval as the motive for adopting or abstaining from certain types of behavior.'*

² In the Western business world some executives like to be flattered as gods. Pleading for them to go away is also vehement but usually inaudible.

³ One should, therefore, wait before taking an unconscious accident victim elsewhere.

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1.4 Bon

Bon is Tibet's earliest known religion. It is said to have come to Western Tibet around 16,000 years ago from an unknown land further west. Not much is known about its development. It originated in Siberian shamanism but its unique features are obscured by assimilation into Tantric Buddhism. Bon shamans like others used magic, rituals and offerings to tame demons. Theirs included nyen who lived in rocks and trees and red skinned tsen who lived in the sky, rode on red horses and fired arrows at anyone they encountered. Both caused sickness and death. Lu lived in lakes, rivers and wells where they kept vast hoards of treasure. They had snake bodies and brought leprosy. Bon dominated the court until Songtsen Gampo adopted Buddhism as the state religion in the first half of the 7th century. Presumably it resonated with him but it also helped him consolidate power. His father had only recently subdued the other warlords. Changing the state religion justified a purge. Bon shamans hid their texts and fled.

'Bon' originally meant a shaman but now refers to a doctrine and practices. Bon deities were conflated with ones imported into Mahayana Buddhism from Hinduism. Guru Rinpoche declared he had converted the demon god Tangla to Buddhism, for example, and said Tangla would henceforth guard Tibet against demons that remained hostile. He said some demons could not be converted and would be kept in check by those that had and by shamanistic and Mahayana practices that evolved into Tibetan Buddhism.

When the Gelug order came to power Bon was suppressed again along with the original Nyingma order. That's when the respectful Tibetan tongue greeting is said to have originated. The tongue had to be extended to officials to show it was light colored. Constant recitation of the old mantras would have turned it black. We are now, according to Bon belief, living in the world of the South, one of four universes. It will soon tip over because men have lost their virtue but it will be replaced by another one where everyone will live to be a hundred.

1.5 Hinduism

Hinduism originated four or five thousand years ago. It had no individual founder and has no doctrine that all must accept. It is monotheistic with a trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, as well as the Supreme Being, Brahman but it appears polytheistic because aspects of Brahman are worshipped as individual deities. There are also sects that claim Vishnu or Shiva is the supreme one and there are great differences between learned Hinduism mediated by Brahmin priests and popular forms of Hindu worship in villages. Some say Hinduism is better considered a civilization than a religion because it is a distinct culture where an enormous range of beliefs is accepted but all must follow the same code of behavior.

The word 'Hindu' comes from the Persian name for India, *'the land beyond the River Sindhu'*, now known as the Indus. Place names before territories had precisely specified boundaries meant an area of people with a distinct culture. The Persian word encompassed all Indian tribes and, therefore, all their religions. Hinduism is based on Vedic texts brought to India by Aryan nomads around 1,500 BC. It evolved to incorporate the tribal religions. Multiple doctrines arose along the way, among which

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many Hindus consider Buddhism to be one. The Aryan Vedic gods represented forces of nature and were worshipped with ritual sacrifices round a fire. The native Indian religions were also polytheistic but worship of those gods was built on asceticism and holy bathing. When the religions intermingled, the idea of renunciation became central. The doctrine of an all-pervading god manifested in every being, that God is not separate from but is the world, developed around 800 BC. A couple of hundred years later, the focus turned more to the behavioral implications of God's omnipresence; duty, renunciation of self and a moral code anchored by reincarnation and motivated by love.

The Hindu Supreme Being is Brahman, not to be confused with Brahma. Brahman is infinite, eternal, indescribable, and includes everything bounded by time, space and causation, both 'being' and whatever is beyond being, 'non-being'. Brahman gave the task of creating the universe to Brahma. It is said that Brahman first created water into which he deposited his seed and from that seed a golden egg was born from which Brahma emerged. Another version is that Brahma was born from a 1,000-petalled lotus growing in Vishnu's navel. In any case, Brahma created directly from his mind ten Prajapatis who are the fathers of the human race, and seven Saptarishi, great sages who helped create the universe. He also created his consort, Sarasvati, the goddess of wisdom, science and the arts. She is a fair woman with four arms dressed in white and seated on a white lotus. Brahma has four arms, too, but he's red and also has four heads. He originally had five but Shiva cut one off. Some say he did it because Brahma became obsessed with Sarasvati. She was embarrassed by his longing stares and tried to avoid them by moving left, behind him, and to his right. He sprouted new heads to keep staring. When she jumped above him and a fifth head sprouted on top Shiva cut it off because Brahma was wrong to be obsessed with his daughter. Others say Shiva was enraged when Brahma and Vishnu were arguing about who was the superior and Brahma lied to bolster his case. Shiva cut off the head that spoke the lie. Brahma is considered equal to Vishnu and Shiva but few worship him. Some say that's because he was the creator and his work is done. Others have a third explanation for why Shiva cut off his head. It was to punish Brahma for his boastful lie. They say Shiva also uttered a curse at that time so Brahma would never be worshipped.

Along with everything else, Brahma created the Hindu caste system. There are four named castes, a Spanish word meaning lineage, and the outcastes. The top caste, Brahmins, were born from Brahma's mouth. They became mediators between gods and men. The Kshatriyas were born from his arms. They wield weapons to protect society. Vaishyas were born from his thighs and work at trade and agriculture. These castes are 'born again' in a ceremony and are served by the Shudras born of Brahma's feet. The outcastes known as Chandalas or untouchables had to live outside the village and enter only to collect night soil. Caste is inconsistent with the idea of god manifested in every being but it was always part of Hindu practice. It started with the Aryan nomad society of priests, warriors and commoners, a division of labor in which people could easily change position. Hierarchy developed with priests and warriors at the top after the Aryans settled. Elaborate racial purity practices were established to differentiate those at the top from the darker skinned people in the trade and agriculture caste. As work grew ever more specialized the trade caste fragmented into sub-castes like European guilds. Society became more and more stratified until India's first Constitution in 1950 abolished castes and equality was guaranteed to all.

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Vishnu, the second deity of the trinity, represents mercy and goodness. He preserves the universe Brahma created. He is said to be the cosmic ocean, the one thing in existence before the universe. His skin is blue. That represents his all-pervasiveness because the sky is blue. He has four arms, the front pair representing his physical existence and the ones on his back his presence in the spiritual world. He is usually dressed in yellow and reclines on the coiled serpent, Seshnaga, who floats on the cosmic ocean. He holds a conch shell, the originator of the five elements, water, fire, air, earth and space. The sound made by blowing a conch is the primeval sound of creation. Vishnu's consort, Lakshmi, is the goddess of wealth and fortune. She is usually represented by his side or at his feet. She's a fair woman with red clothes. Vishnu has ten (some say 22) avatars, i.e., incarnations, among which Rama and Krishna are the most revered. Some say he took the form of Buddha as one of his avatars to encourage people to reject the old Vedic deities and caste system. One way Vishnu is worshipped is in the form of saligrams, ammonite fossils that symbolically represent his intangible nature. In the original Vedic texts he is associated with light. He is manifested as fire, lightning and the Sun. He appears to have become so important because dawn and dusk are the chief times for rituals, which include lighting a lamp and making offerings.

Most Aryan deities represented forces of nature that were propitiated by animal sacrifice. The first phase of Hinduism, known as the Vedic age, followed suit. Hindus were meat-eaters then. Around 500 BC when Buddhism and Jainism were founded and there was a shift to vegetarianism, Hindus began to offer flowers instead of animals and Vishnu was increasingly associated more with sacrifice than light. The cow, by the way, seems to be not holy but taboo. There's a tale in the Vedas of five priests finishing off a whole cow at a sitting but cattle were later exempted from sacrifice because of confusion over the word 'go', which in Vedic Sanskrit usually means 'light' but can also mean 'cows'. Only the cow meaning survived so the 'protector of the Go' who was the keeper of the light was misunderstood to be the protector of the cows. Gandhi used to say the cow represents all creatures and symbolizes the vegetarian way.

Shiva, the third member of the trinity, is the destroyer of evil. Because Hindus believe creation inevitably follows destruction, he is considered a reproductive power and is often worshipped in the form of a shivalinga, a phallus. He is also the Lord of the Dance, symbolizing the dance of the universe with all its heavenly bodies in balance. Shiva is most often depicted as a dark-skinned ascetic with a blue throat and matted hair sitting cross-legged on a tiger skin and adorned with a crescent moon and snakes hanging from his neck and arms. He has four arms and three eyes, one of which is always closed. His consort Devi comes in many forms including Kali, the goddess of death, and the more peaceful Parvati. Shiva has a blue throat because when the ocean was churned to produce the nectar of immortality, poison was also produced. He swallowed it to save the world from destruction and Parvati clasped his throat to stop it going deep inside his body. The only harm it did was turning his throat blue. His hair is matted to represent the wind whose subtle form is the breathing of all beings. The crescent moon on his head means he possesses the powers of both procreation and destruction. Some say he gave serpents a place of honor out of sympathy because they're despised and feared, others that serpents symbolize his wisdom. His third eye appeared when Parvati playfully covered his eyes with her hands and the universe was plunged into darkness.

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He quickly formed a new eye in the center of his forehead from which fire emerged to restore light and order. The light from that eye is very powerful so he only opens it to incinerate evil doers.

Shiva lives on Mt. Kailash in Tibet. Most sects that consider him supreme are based in northern India. He is not mentioned in the Vedas and there are many explanations of his origin. One is that Brahma (also not mentioned in the Vedas) meditated to create a child. It appeared crying and when asked why, said it had no name. Brahma named it Rudra, meaning howler. It cried seven more times and got seven more names. That is why Shiva has eight forms. Rudra, fierce and destructive deity of the storm, is one of several primitive gods incorporated into him. Shiva has many attendants called ganas, beings with human bodies and animal heads. His elephant-headed son Ganesha, god of wisdom, is their leader. There are several explanations for that head. One is that he enraged Shiva by refusing to let him enter the house where Parvati was bathing and Shiva chopped off his head. That made Parvati angry. To pacify her Shiva grabbed the first head he saw, which happened to be an elephant's, and put it on Ganesha to revive him. Another explanation is that Ganesha's original head burned to a crisp when Parvati presented him to Shani, the planet Saturn.

In Tantric Hinduism the form of Shiva that symbolizes extreme masculinity, i.e., virility and warrior skills, is worshipped with the linga as the icon of fertility and power. Tantric philosophy emerged in village life around 500 BC and exists in Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Bon and other forms. The world we experience is believed to be a manifestation of divine energy that can be channeled by rituals. Practices include using the breath and images to calm the mind, using chants to focus, and visualizing oneself as a deity. The rituals have three levels of meaning; gross, higher and subtle. Many use sexual imagery. Gross, i.e., physical union represents uniting concepts at the higher level. At the subtle level it means full realization of being by uniting with a divine being's attributes. Tantra is dangerous because practitioners risk getting trapped in the practice itself so a guru's guidance is essential. A key text for both Tantric Hindus and Tibetan Buddhists was composed in the 9th century by Matsyendranath, '*master of fish*', so named because he discovered a tantra inside a fish.

Rules for Hindu conduct were written in the book of Manu around 500 BC. That was also when Buddhism and Jainism were founded and when learned and popular Hinduism diverged. Brahmin priests recite the Vedas, worship Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu, and forbid blood offerings. The priests of popular Hinduism are often not Brahmin, do not recite the Vedas, worship deities that are often female and local, and do make animal sacrifices. Local goddesses are often identified as the consort of Shiva or Vishnu. Festivals are held to celebrate their wedding. As well as mainstream Hinduism where priests intermeditate with deities there are also forms where worshippers deal directly with a chosen deity. Bhakti cults do that with songs in their local language. The Sikh religion began this way and eventually separated from Hinduism. The most important part of Hindu worship is the daily visit to the temple. One should bathe and put on clean clothes beforehand. It is especially good to bathe at the temple because that water is holy. You wear a folded towel over your shoulder to signify you have taken the ritual bath then go inside the temple to visit the deity and give offerings to the temple priest who presents them to the idol. The priest performs a puja, swinging a lamp, ringing a

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bell and worshipping the deity with flowers, at the end of which the worshipper receives some of the offerings he shared. The priest applies holy water and a dot of red powder, kumkum, to the worshipper's forehead to signify that (s)he visited the temple.

The most important goal for a Hindu is to escape the cycle of rebirths, which one does by worshipping the gods and living in the right way through many lifetimes. The rules differ according to caste and the phase of one's life. Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya boys are reborn via the Upanayana ceremony when they are given a sacred string and begin their instruction in Sanskrit and the scriptures. A chaste life of study and devotion is then required. The next phase, when the boy becomes a man and marries, requires self-forgetful service and raising a family. He must have children and is expected to enjoy the associated pleasures. When a man has fulfilled his duties as head of a family and his children are married he should retreat from social life and devote himself to escaping the cycle of rebirths. He must become chaste again, move away from his family and live as an ascetic. Millions of Indian men do this and live as beggars walking from holy place to place. Others interpret renunciation as selfless work without attachment to the result as Lord Krishna instructs in the Bhagavad-Gita, *'In works be thine office, in their fruits must it never be. Be not moved by the fruits of works; but let not attachment to worklessness dwell in thee.'* Hinduism primarily has to do with man's behavior. The Supreme Being is infinite, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent but may appear differently to different people and can be approached in different ways.

1.6 Buddhism

Buddhism developed from Hinduism around 500 BC. It is not a religion although it looks like one. The Tibetan form in particular has a vast array of deities even though Buddhism's founder was not enlightened by a god, did not say there is a creator and forbade worship of himself. He said gods and devils do exist but they did not create the world, they do not have the key to salvation and if we have no experience of them we should not accept his word because belief hinders perception of what is real. The purpose of life is to work toward enlightenment, which everyone can attain. There is no doctrine, only techniques to help us find complete awareness and acceptance of reality. Recommended metaphors include considering that you and every other being have lived innumerable previous lives, which means every other being could have been your mother in a past life or you theirs, a powerful motive for love. Central ideas are that everything is impermanent and is connected with everything else. Our desire for unchanging perfection and our belief that things have separate identities are fundamental misunderstandings that entrap us in suffering.

The founder of Buddhism was born in the Sakya realm in Lumbini, Nepal, around 560 BC. His delighted father the king named him Siddhartha, meaning *'wish fulfilled'*. The first evidence of his destiny was at a plowing festival where nurses left him to sneak a look at the events. When they came back baby Siddhartha was sitting cross-legged and had attained the purity of mind known as Samadhi. At sixteen he was married to his beautiful cousin. They lived in happy luxury for thirteen years until he disobeyed his over-protective father, left the palace for the first time and was horrified by a decrepit old man, a diseased person and a corpse. It was his first ever sight of suffering. He also saw an ascetic who seemed to have found peace amidst the surrounding misery. He

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decided to renounce his privileged life and seek truth. Not even the birth of his son dissuaded him. Instead of rejoicing he exclaimed, *"An impediment (rahu) has been born"* and named the boy Rahula. He left the palace and began a life of poverty.

Siddhartha first studied under an ascetic. That did not lead to enlightenment, just better concentration. His next teacher helped him to the highest spiritual development then known but it was far short of his goal. He then spent six years in solitary struggle. First, *"I clenched my teeth and strove to hold down, subdue, and destroy my immoral thoughts ... My body was fatigued and was not calmed."* Next he, *"checked inhalation and exhalation from my mouth and nostrils ... My body was fatigued and was not calmed."* Perhaps not eating would do the trick? But, *"deities approached me and said, 'Do not, good sir, practice total abstinence from food. If you do practice it, we will pour celestial essence through your body's pores; with that you will be sustained.' And I thought, 'If I claim to be practicing starvation and deities pour celestial essence through my pores it would be a fraud.'"* He decided self-mortification only exhausted the body, weakened the intellect and led to spiritual weariness. It was no better than self-indulgence. Was there another way? Remembering the plowing festival, he meditated back to the state he attained then and continued from there. One afternoon, a lady brought him rich rice milk. The next morning he reflected on his former lives and gained the First Knowledge, purity of thought, by dispelling ignorance of the past. Next he saw beings disappearing from one state of existence and reappearing in another and how evil deeds, words and thoughts lead to rebirth in sorrowful states while good ones lead to rebirth in happiness. That is the Second Knowledge which dispels ignorance of the future. At last he achieved the Third Knowledge and his mind was delivered from *"the corruption of craving for existence, from the corruption of ignorance."* So, in his 35th year, he became one of a series of past and future Buddhas⁴ known by his family name as Buddha Gotama and by his ethnicity as Sakyamuni, the Sakya Sage.

Buddha Gotama did not call himself a savior. He said he could point out perfect understanding but we must all reach it by our own efforts and in our own way. He formulated four truths; (1) life and suffering are inseparable, (2) the cause of suffering is desire, (3) to be rid of suffering one must escape desire, and (4) escape from desire can be achieved by following an eight-fold path that includes right understanding of the nature of life, right aspirations, right meditation and right actions. The path ends in escape from rebirth into suffering. He starts with suffering to give us a compelling motivation. If we don't know our house is on fire, we'll stay inside. To get us to come out Buddha tells us our lives are burning with old age, sickness and death and our minds are aflame with greed, hatred and delusion. Because he was raised a Hindu he accepted that death merely punctuates the cycles of one's evolution and good and bad acts in each incarnation determine one's fate in the next. He sought a way of behaving that would complete a being's evolution, not a pre-established perception of reality but a way to understand one's own situation. He established a community, Sangha, and sought to avoid conflict with kings and priests by pledging its obedience to temporal rulers and prohibiting performance of priestly services.

⁴ *Budh means to understand*

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Buddhist practices based on the concept that everyone must work out their own path to enlightenment are known as Theravada. For the first five hundred years they were almost exclusively the province of monastics. Around the time of Christ monks began going out to teach and relabeled the traditional Theravada practices Hinayana meaning Lesser Vehicle. They termed their new teachings for high caste house-holders as well as monks Mahayana the Greater Vehicle. Around the 6th century monks began to focus more on the uneducated. That was when magic and Tantric practices began to play an important role and Buddhism was introduced to Tibet.

By following the Hinayana teachings one is at last freed from rebirth and becomes an Arhat, 'one who has totally destroyed his passions'. Graduation is via stages starting with comprehension of doctrine and ending with renunciation of the world. Only by living as a celibate monk or nun can one reach the final stage where after death one will experience no rebirth. Thus only monks can gain Hinayana's ultimate benefits and since Arhats are no longer alive, they cannot help others. The concept of the Arhat later evolved into three grades. The Simple Arhat attains perfection by following the teachings of a Supreme Buddha but is not himself a Buddha and cannot teach others to attain Arhatship. A higher grade is the Pratyeka-Buddha or Solitary Saint who attains perfection by himself. The highest form is the Supreme Buddha who attains perfection and then delays his emancipation from rebirth to teach others how to save themselves.

Mahayana was originated by Asvaghosha around of the end of the first century AD. Its chief publicist was Nagarjuna, who wrote the Prajna Paramita, which he claimed to be Sakyamuni's teachings. This is where metaphysical and divine Bodhisattvas entered the picture. Nagarjuna said they must be worshipped. The Buddha was deified and said to manifest in three ways, as the formless perfect Adi-Buddha, as celestial Bodhisattvas and as human Buddhas one of whom was Sakyamuni⁵. Amitabha, 'The Infinite Light' is one of the earliest celestial Buddhas. He lives in a glorious paradise in the West and is envisioned as the red setting sun. He likely originated among converted Indo-Scyth sun-worshippers who were the chief patrons of early Mahayana and got their original religion from Persian Zoroastrians. The Mahayana concept of the Bodhisattva evolved from the Hinayana Supreme Buddha Arhats. Bodhisattvas choose to be reborn wherever they can be of most help until every being is enlightened. According to Mahayana, all beings can become bodhisattvas. There's a story about three people in a desert who come to a circular wall. One climbs on the others' shoulders and leaps over. The second follows. The third climbs and sees the beautiful garden but jumps back to show others the way. He is a Bodhisattva. Confusingly, older texts use the same word to mean one who is well advanced but still on the path to enlightenment. When the Buddha was deified countless local gods were repositioned as celestial Bodhisattvas, saviors who can accelerate their followers' enlightenment. Hinayana does not incorporate prayer because there is no divine being who could respond but it is an important part of Mahayana practice.

Tantric Buddhism began to take shape in the fourth century AD when Arya Asanga (approx 300 – 370), a monk from Peshawar, originated Yogacharya, i.e., 'contemplative' Mahayana which, like Zen Buddhism of Japan, seeks enlightenment by sudden illumination. He claimed to have been given *The Five Books of Maitreya* directly by the

⁵ *Queen Victoria was said to be another.*

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future Buddha. Fully formed Tantric Buddhism developed around 700 when magic and supernatural powers were added, Tantric female energy was integrated with Mahayana theism and Yoga mysticism and the theory of the perfect Adi-Buddha was embellished. The Adi-Buddha was now said to have originated five meditative Buddhas each of whom originated an active celestial counterpart and a human Buddha. Sakyamuni is one of the human ones, his meditative Buddha being Amitabha and his celestial Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Another of Avalokitesvara's incarnations is the Dalai Lama. Tibetan Buddhists differ on whether tantric practice should be reserved for senior monks (the Gelug view) or extended to junior ones and lay people (the Nyingma position).

1.7 Tibetan Buddhism

The unique character of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism results from adding to the Indian substrate Bon practices from Central Asian steppe nomad shamans, a native Tibetan tradition of divine kings and tales of magicians that probably came with Persian traders. The apocalyptic vision and sorcery of Tantrism resonated powerfully with Tibetans. In monasteries festooned with silk brocade, golden statues of multi-headed deities, intricate mystical paintings and grotesque masks, lamas chant, ring hand bells, clash cymbals and blow tremendous trumpets. The scene is as flamboyant as the highest Christian cathedrals but the atmosphere is dark and the ceiling low. There is no soaring song of a boy soprano to suggest a paradise surrounded by angels. Karen Armstrong says the lamas' bass chants are groans from a world of suffering. But when you meet any Tibetan Buddhist who has deeply studied the teachings, they are happy. Their spirit is light. How do the dark ritual practices lead to illumination, to the attainment of light? Perhaps the chants are deep because joy arises from peace deep in our being.

Tibetan Buddhism is perplexing because the concept of the world on which it is based is multi-dimensional. There are multiple explanations for the same event. All events have an ordinary and an extraordinary level, there are outer, inner and secret levels of history and the same beings are incarnated as many different individuals. Siddhartha, for example, was at the ordinary level a human prince who renounced his position and achieved perfect enlightenment while on the extraordinary level he was Buddha incarnated as Siddhartha to teach others by example how to attain Buddhahood. Songtsen Gampo was on the ordinary level a king who began turning Tibet into a peaceful civilization and sealed treaties with China and Nepal by marriages while on the extraordinary level, Lokeshvara and Tara saw it was a propitious time to bring Buddhism to Tibet and incarnated themselves as Songtsen Gampo and his brides.

Tibetan Buddhism encompasses not only philosophy but many other topics including astronomy, medicine and dance drama. Astronomy is used to calculate the right days for ceremonies, medicine is an aid for rituals that provide cures, and dance is a teaching method. Lamas translated every Sanskrit book they could find and began original work around the end of the 13th century. The original scriptures were organized into the Kangyur, *'translations of the Buddha word'*, the equivalent of the Bible or the Torah. The chief explanatory works were collected into the Tengyur, *'translations of the treatises'*, the equivalent of the Talmud. The Kangyur is printed in 108 volumes, the propitious number, and covers discipline, sermons and metaphysics. The Tengyur comprises over two hundred twenty five volumes. Each book is wrapped in cloth and has several

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hundred leaves of tough paper up to two feet long and eight inches wide between heavy wooden covers. Every monastery tries to have the entire collection. Lamas should study, practice and become fit to teach but only a few will succeed in their current lifetime. They must gain not mastery of one doctrine to be implanted into all but wisdom so they can prescribe the unique right path for each individual.

Buddhism first appeared in Tibet when Lha Thothori Nyentsen was king, probably around 200 AD. Indian scholars gave that Bon king a Sanskrit book of Buddhist scripture. He could not read it but felt it was auspicious and named it *The Awesome Secret*. He said it had descended from the sky and prophesied that a future king would reveal its secrets. More than four hundred years later, King Songtsen Gampo (circa 618-649) translated the Awesome Secret into Tibetan. He was 13 when he succeeded his father who had subdued the other warlords in central Tibet and he spent most of his life at war. He centralized the government and moved the capital from Yarlung, cemetery of the Bon god-kings, to Lhasa. To solidify political alliances he married two princesses, Bhrikuti of Nepal in 638 and Wenchung of China in 641. They sparked his interest in Buddhism. To learn more he sent people to India, had a written form of the Tibetan language developed and established a program to translate Indian books. Science and the arts began to develop and Tibet's first legal code and history were drafted. But he made no more progress converting the Bon aristocracy than Nestorian Christian missionaries who were also active in Tibet at this time.

Buddhism became established about a hundred years later under King Trisong Detsen (circa 755-797), the greatest of all Tibet's generals. He conquered most of Central Asia. His territorial conquests gave him political strength but he was a Buddhist when Tibet's laws still prohibited being anything other than Bon so his status as god-king depended on the aristocracy's acceptance of his Bon divinity. He eliminated his Bon rivals by bribing an oracle to predict a terrible famine unless two people exiled themselves to the royal cemetery as a sacrifice. His two senior ministers demanded the honor. With his main rivals out of the way, he sent to India for the great Buddhist teacher, Santaraksita. Four months later when a thunder storm destroyed the temple where the Potala Palace is now, swept away villages and destroyed the harvest it seemed the gods were punishing the people for Santaraksita's heretical teachings. He had to flee and recommended Padmasambhava as his replacement, the world's most powerful sorcerer-priest. That was OK with the people because the savage spirits had to be subdued and it made sense to get the most powerful magician known in India as the 'second Buddha'.

Padmasambhava came to Tibet, melted snowy mountains, boiled lakes, caused avalanches and defeated savage spirits. He transformed one Bon deity after another into Buddhist gods and integrated the rites, myths and magic of Bon into a Tibetan variant of Tantric Buddhism. The priests retained their positions under a new name, lama, and were content. Lama, the 'superior one', at first meant the head of a monastery but later came to mean all monks. The population and land holdings of monasteries grew and after a century or two many lamas were no more than prosperous farmers with above average prestige. Sects began developing in the 11th century, first the Kadampa who condemned magic, then the more ascetic Kagyupa who meditate in caves, then the Sakyapa whose leaders were viceroys of Tibet for a hundred years until the Mongol empire collapsed in the mid-14th century. In the 15th century the Gelugpa emerged and

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were dominant by the early 17th. Gelugpa lamas are celibate with a stricter moral code than the Sakyapa and their practices are more ritualistic. To distinguish themselves from lamas of the older sects who wore red hats, they adopted yellow ones and called those who did not join them Nyingmapa, the old sect.

All the sects make use of prayer flags and wheels. In Tantric philosophy a printed prayer is as effective as a spoken one, especially if it moves as prayer flags do in the wind. Prayer wheels with a roll of printed prayers can be turned with a flick of the wrist or you can establish one driven by wind, convection or water power. The 'Airy Horse of Luck' at the center of many flags seems to build on the Jewel-Horse of the Universal Monarch. Sakyamuni could have been one if he'd wanted worldly grandeur. The jewel-horse carries its rider through the air to realize his desires, especially for jewels and other wealth. Flags were originally made and sold by lamas, there's a ritual for placing them and days when doing so is especially propitious, and it is good to have a lama perform the ceremony. Lamas used to get most of their livelihood by thwarting devils whose activities only they could discern and frustrate. They participated in every birth, marriage and death and were consulted by everyone for a forecast of the coming year and a regimen to neutralize portending evils. Illustrations of the Wheel of Life are used to meditate about where one may be reborn; as a god, ungodly spirit, man, beast, ghost, or an inhabitant of hell. The place of one's rebirth was originally governed entirely by one's own deeds but lamas later claimed they could influence the result. If good deeds outweigh your bad ones you're reborn as a god, spirit or man depending on how virtuous you were. If bad deeds predominate, you're reborn as a beast, a ghost, or, if you were extremely wicked, in hell. The 'Religious King of the Dead' decides where you'll be reborn by weighing your deeds. There's no appeal.

Even if you're reborn as a god, you will die again. As Waddell explains in the *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, *'The human being who has been sufficiently charitable, virtuous, and pious during his earthly life may be reborn as a god and enjoy bliss for an almost incalculable time ... But when his merit is exhausted, then his lake of nectar dries up, his wish-granting tree and cow and horse die, his splendid dress and ornaments disappear, his garden and flowers wither, his body, no longer bathed by nectar, loses its luster, and his person becomes loathsome to his goddess companions and the other gods, who shun him, and he dies miserably. If he has led a virtuous life during his existence as a god, then he may be reborn in heaven, otherwise he goes to a lower region and may even be sent to hell.'* What if you're reborn as a ghost, lower even than a beast but not quite so low as hell? Waddell writes, *"This is the special place of those who on earth were miserly, envious and uncharitable. They have jewels and food and drink in plenty, but cannot enjoy them, and are always gnawed by hunger and thirst, as they are given huge bodies with microscopic mouths and gullets. And when any food is taken it is transformed into sharp knives and saws, which lacerate the bowels and come out externally, making large painful wounds."* The world of your rebirth is not always the one you're in now or an adjacent one. If you expiate your sins in your life as a ghost, for example, you will likely be reborn as a man just as if you'd completed a jail sentence.

As well as Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags and wheels I had also seen liturgical items and practices that I associated with Roman Catholic worship; rosaries, holy water, incense

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and so forth. Had they been introduced by Christian missionaries? The most likely candidates seemed to be Nestorians of the Eastern Church.

1.8 Nestorian Christianity

Nestorius was a Syrian priest who became Patriarch (archbishop) of Constantinople in 428 at a time of rivalry between the Eastern Church's leaders there and in Alexandria. Those in Alexandria accentuated Christ's divinity. Nestorius focused on his humanity and said he could not be both human and divine. In 431 a council was set up to resolve the dispute. Cyril the Alexandrian Patriarch seized control, deposed Nestorius before supporters of his position came and was himself deposed when they arrived. Cyril later got reinstated via bribery but Nestorius was exiled and his teachings outlawed. His followers fled to Iran and a missionary Nestorian Church began to grow. The first bishop, or perhaps metropolitan⁶, in Tibet was consecrated by Patriarch⁷ Timothy I in 781, just six years after Padmasambhava brought Tantric Buddhism to Tibet. Timothy says 'metropolitan' in one letter implying a substantial presence in Tibet. Everywhere Nestorians established a see⁸ they set up a school, library and hospital so although records of their activities in Tibet are sparse, their influence could have been significant.

Nestorian missionaries were eager to penetrate unknown regions to spread their faith. Traders between China, India and Tibet also spread Christian and other beliefs and practices. Christianity probably arrived very early in the Himalayas and was widespread by the time Buddhism entered Tibet. There were bishops in Afghanistan and Turkmenistan by 424, both were elevated to metropolitan sees in the mid-500s and India and China got metropolitans in the early 600s. Over the next few hundred years Nestorians played important roles in courts where their predecessors came to proselytize. They were ministers in the Mongol court when Genghiz Khan became emperor in 1206. Nestorian Christianity was only swept out when Muslim Tamerlane took over Genghiz Khan's empire in the second half of the 1300s.

So did Tibetan Buddhist and Roman Catholic liturgical devices have a common origin? I was not the first to see the parallels. A hundred years earlier Waddell wrote about, *'pompous services with celibate and tonsured monks and nuns, candles, bells, censers, rosaries, mitres, pastoral crooks, worship of relics, confession, intercession of 'the Mother of God', litanies and chants, holy water, triad divinity, organized hierarchy, etc.'* Christian missionaries were active north, west and south of Tibet in the first centuries AD. By the time Padmasambhava came to Tibet there were 19 Nestorian metropolitans and 85 bishops across Asia. Nestorian missionaries must have been in Tibet much earlier but the earliest record I found is from around this time. On a rock in western Tibet three Nestorian crosses and inscriptions in Sogdian⁹ and Tibetan tell of a man from Samarkand, Uzbekistan on his way to visit Tibet's ruler.

The same rituals could, of course, have come to Tibet via both Nestorians and Padmasambhava. Jesus is said to have traveled to India and the apostle Thomas to

⁶ A metropolitan is equivalent to an archbishop who is responsible for up to a dozen bishops

⁷ A Patriarch is an uber-archbishop like the Archbishop of Canterbury

⁸ A see is the area over which a bishop exercises authority

⁹ Nestorian liturgy was in Syriac but their teachings were chiefly in Sogdian (Uzbekistan).

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have built a temple there in 52. Maybe Thomas brought practices that survived and were known to Padmasambhava? It's even possible they were introduced from China. There are reports of Christian funeral stones there in 86. The only definite fact is the ritual practices were not originated by Padmasambhava then passed to Nestorians and on to Roman Catholics. The eastern and western Christian churches split three centuries before Padmasambhava's time. Constantine legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire in 313, the bishop in the Persian capital assumed the title Catholicos two years later, his successor was declared equal to the Pope in 424 and the eastern and western churches then developed separately.

Eventually I realized the same liturgical objects pre-date both Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity. Ovid and Virgil in the century before Christ mention Roman use of incense. They probably adopted it from Assyrians or Egyptians who had been using it for millennia. The earliest recorded use in Christian worship is in the 5th century but it began much earlier. The Sacramentals of the Eastern Catholic Church state, *"incense is used only occasionally in Roman Catholic Churches but is used for every Divine Liturgy in the Eastern Catholic Churches. Incense traditionally signifies the prayers of the Church rising to the throne of God. During the Divine Liturgy, incense is directed to the people several times, to the Gospel book, the icons, the altar and the clergy"*. There was censuring in Old Testament times. In Exodus, one reads, *'Aaron shall offer fragrant incense on it; every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall offer it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening he shall offer it, a regular incense offering before the Lord throughout your generations.'*

Prayer beads are also ancient. 'Bead' comes from Anglo-Saxon 'bede' meaning prayer. There are stone sculptures of Hindu sages with rosaries from before the time of Christ and the term 'rosary' predates Christ. The Sanskrit word 'japamala' means 'string of roses'. A rosary is a collection of roses. The number of beads varies. Early Christians used 150 because there are 150 psalms in the Old Testament. Buddhist and Hindu rosaries have 108. Some from around 500 BC have 66. Nine is a sacred number to Mongols and their calendar is a twelve year cycle so, since nine times twelve is 108, perhaps that's why it's important in Tibetan Buddhism. The Muslim rosary has 99. 'Worry beads' from the Middle East have 33. Greeks use 100 knots on a cord. Marco Polo said the king of Malabar wore a silk thread round his neck with *'104 faire pearls as beads to number his prayers'*. Egypt's St. Anthony, the founder of Christian monasticism three centuries after Christ, brought the Byzantine Rosary into Christian worship in the form of a knotted cord. Paul of Thebes counted his prayers using 300 pebbles around the same time. Pebbles and knots were later replaced by wooden and pottery beads or precious stones. At the start of the second millennium, Countess (aka Lady) Godiva willed her gemstone rosary to a monastery to be hung on their statue of the Virgin Mary. In the 1200s, English prayer bead makers known as paternosters organized craft guilds specializing in wood, amber, gemstones, metal or glass. In the 15th century, Europeans carried rosaries as a sign of penance and pilgrims wore beads round their waist. Rosaries of amber, crystal, coral and aromatic wood were imported from India.

All Tibetan religious objects have very ancient origins. Chortens, *'receptacle for offerings'*, correspond to Indian stupas that began as simple domes housing relics but later had five sections to represent the elements into which a body is transformed at

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death. A rectangular base represents earth, the globe above represents water, a triangular shape represents fire, air is represented by a crescent and an oval shape in it represents ether. The crescent and oval also represent the sun and moon. Later chortens are often surmounted by a capital with a pair of eyes on its sides like the sacred eyes on Egyptian vases connected with sun-worship. The sacred eye may have come to Tibetan Buddhism from Zoroastrianism along with magical practices. And so on.

At last I recognized that Tibetan Buddhist gurus are like our trek guide in Sikkim who did not know the way to John's destination. What he did know was how to communicate with John and find others who could point out aspects of his path. A Tibetan Buddhist guru's mission is to help individuals recognize and follow their unique path. Many proven (i.e., skilful) means to that end have been discovered over the millennia by spiritual practitioners throughout the world. It's really not surprising that those used by Roman Catholic priests, some Eastern Christian churches and Tibetan Buddhist lamas should be similar. We never will know exactly how they spread. What is far more important is the difference in what Tibetan Buddhism teaches.