

## Chapter III

# THE SACRED ARCHITECTURE OF TIBET ~ NOTES ON THE AESTHETICS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

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Figure 1 : Tibetan Tent with painted symbols of stylised flowers and butterflies (after Harding, *Footloose in the Himalaya*)

**T**IBETAN CIVILISATION IS PROFOUNDLY SACRED IN character. It is normal for all aspects of a traditional culture, including artefacts, rituals, and history, to be permeated with a sense of the Sacred.<sup>2</sup> Secular utilitarian modes seldom exist in isolation, but are complemented by and indeed preceded by their corresponding religious and metaphysical dimension.<sup>3</sup> This sense of the Sacred is particularly evident in the purity and clarity of the traditional culture of Tibet.

Thus a distinction may be drawn between religious and secular, of which the most obvious instance is that of the world of monasteries and hermits, and the lay world which lies outside. Yet in a deeper sense, both emerge as complementary facets of a religious civilisation. The life of the layman in the midst of this world, is one of preparation for that other world. This is reflected in the observance by the laity of ethical norms sanctified by Buddhism. Snellgrove comments on the zeal for the religious life among the laity, which expresses itself in honour shown the religious community.<sup>4</sup> Lay-folk offer willing unpaid labour and bestow generous gifts in support of religious folk. In return, those who have dedicated themselves to the religious life offer guidance to those immersed in the affairs of this world. Many lay-folk build for themselves little meditation-shelters well above the

villages, where they withdraw from their families to read and meditate alone. In so doing, they approach the life of monks and hermits. Withdrawn from the world, the life of the religious-folk is one of conscious realisation of the path to Enlightenment. The pattern of mutual cooperation between this-worldly and other-worldly viewpoints, within an overall other-worldly orientation, is also evident in the architecture.

Tibetan architecture is characteristically of solid construction, of stones or sometimes large sun-dried bricks. Inward sloping walls and wooden pillars support flat roofs. A distinction is readily made between secular architecture of house and tent, and religious architecture of *gompa*, *chorten* and *mani-wall*. Nevertheless, it is significant that both tent and house have important religious dimensions. Tucci suggests that the tent and house are not places like other places.<sup>5</sup> The indissoluble community of life between past and present is perceptible here, and the home, interpreted cosmologically, is a projection of the universe into earthly existence. To the parts of the door - lintel, sill, and four surrounding beams - correspond specific colours, symbolic of the four world-eggs out of which came the entire creation, and of the four doors of heaven. The thirteen steps of the staircase allude to the layers or successive stages of heaven.

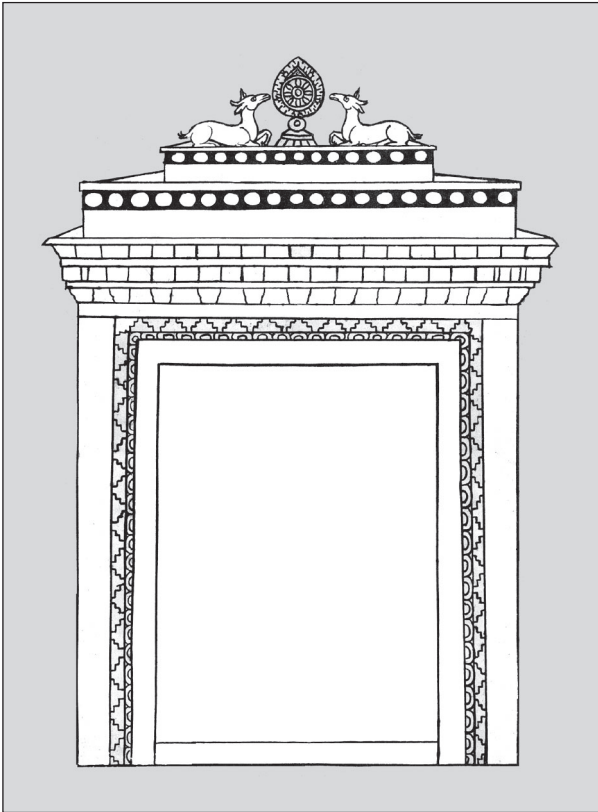


Figure 2 : The Gateway to the Temple  
(after Thubten Legshay Gyatsho)

The Sacred character of the house and its homology with the universe, is reflected also in the structure of religious communities.<sup>6</sup> These are conceived of after the manner of a house, and the masters of this house are described, according to their greater or lesser importance, as pillar (*ka ba*), beam (*lcam*) and so on, with the aim of reinforcing anew the archetypal order beyond time ruling within such an institution.

Thubten Legshay Gyatsho describes the root of the Teaching as being the Tibetan monastic community, who represent the way of entering the door of religion.<sup>7</sup> He discusses the method of erecting the Temple, the resting place of the Teaching. The performance of the Teaching is the cycle of religious duties.

The central goal of practising religion is the ultimate attainment of supreme liberation, won by strenuous study, teaching, and meditating on the correct path. The mental stream becomes endowed with great merit by entering the Door of Religion, erecting Temples, and performing the cycle of religious duties. This generates "Higher Cognition" - an understanding of the true nature of appearances - and the means to eliminate imperfections which obstruct the way to liberation.

Tibetan Buddhism therefore emphasises the purification and eventual enlightenment of Body, Speech, and Mind. Most Buddhist art functions as *rten* (lit. "supports"), that is as physical representations and embodiments of enlightened body, speech, or mind. They

are seen as receptacles or supports of the Sacred. The majority of thankas are *rten*, as are Sacred statues, stupas, and Scriptures. For a Sacred object fully to function as *rten*, it needs to be ceremonially imbued with the spirit of enlightenment by means of a ritual consecration ceremony. Images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas are *sku rten* - Supports of Enlightened Body. Books are *gsung rten* - Supports for Enlightened Speech. According to Snellgrove, they possess greater sanctity than images and shrines, for it is by the word that the form is given life. Chorten are *thugs rten* - Supports for Enlightened Mind. These have been through the ages the supreme symbol of the doctrine. Temples may then be thought of as Supports for Enlightened Body, Speech and Mind. And, as we have seen, they are the Resting Place of the Teaching.

Deliverance arises as a result of the inseparable factors of Method (*thabs*) and Wisdom (*shes rab*). We are then given some insight into the way in which the Temple might function as a support for Enlightened Body, Speech, and Mind. Two tendencies are evident - firstly the logical and doctrinal; and secondly the gnostic. These complementary tendencies are interwoven, but ultimately the liturgical is subservient to the gnostic, for intellectual understanding remains subordinate to living experience. Both tendencies are identifiable in the Temple design, erection and use.

The Temple is a liturgical instrument and a gnostic vessel, created and consecrated according to very precise rules. Firstly, the doctrine is embedded both within the techniques of its design and erection, and within its final form. Secondly, the Temple is both the result of gnosis, and itself provides a means to those ends. It thus functions as a support for Method and Wisdom.

Gyatsho describes how, in the selection of the site, one should seek out a place with good characteristics. These should include the four Earth-pillars and the four Guardians. Having selected a site, the good characteristics present should be held to. Any bad characteristics should be suppressed by their opposite antagonistic natural element, and by erecting the supports of Enlightened Body, Speech and Mind. For the ritual process that purifies the land, and the removal of hindrances through meditative trance, examination should first be made of the serpent-bellied earth-deity. For the design and erection of the Temple, Tantras prescribe that the place be purified by means of mantras. Having removed impediments of the place, one actuates the "protection-circle" through meditation. Control of the land is taken through ceremonies utilising schematic representations, and the land purified through the "stake" rituals and by other means. Significantly, the greatest purifier is to establish everything in the direct realisation of interdependent origination, emptiness (*sunyata*), and so on. The interwoven pattern of liturgy and gnosis is evident in these processes.

The important act of consecration of the Temple is performed immediately on completion. The "transcendent-awareness One", comprising the blessings of the preeminent qualities of complete enlightenment, is



directly instilled into the “Pledged One”, the physical manifestation of pure transcendent awareness. The finished Temple then constitutes a carefully related complex of symbolic forms, which satisfies canonic and aesthetic requirements, and which has been conferred with supernatural power.

Thus through its symbolic form and immediate reality the Temple concretises the method and supports the practice of the way. In providing an adequate support for contemplation, it satisfies necessary liturgical and gnostic requirements. For example, it is customary to build a vestibule which symbolises the “three doors of liberation”. Walls inside the door of the assembly hall are painted with proper examples of the robes and requisite articles for the livelihood of the assembly of fully-ordained monks as set forth in the Vinyana. Other paintings illustrate meditative experiences and the necessary practices of the Six Perfections. And the goal of Enlightenment is represented by the image of the Bodhisattva or Buddha.

The architectural environment is thus conducive to the practice of the means. It assists the pilgrim to bring order into the confused diversity of phenomenal existence, through stilling the mind. The architecture of the Temple is such that in its immediate apprehension, the tendency towards mystical states is enhanced. Higher Cognition is facilitated by the sense of mystery which emanates in the semidarkness of the interior, by the sense of beauty which is achieved in the frescoes, thankas, statues, and banners, and above all by the spiritual purity and clarity of mind one experiences.

Permeating all aspects of the Temple is a sense of proximity to Death, a proximity apparent in many aspects of Tibetan culture. It is not regarded with a sense of fear and avoidance, but of knowledge and acceptance. This critical indication of a healthy society is one sadly lacking in the modern West. W. Evans Wentz draws attention to the traditional understanding of Death as the Real, in comparison with which, life is unreal.<sup>8</sup> Life draws its reality and meaningfulness from the immediacy of Death. Wentz edited English translations of important Tibetan works, including the Book of the Dead.<sup>9</sup> This provides a masterly symbolic language with which to comprehend the process of death, passage through the intermediary region known as the Bardo, and inevitable (for the as yet imperfectly realised soul) conception and rebirth. The Book of the Great Liberation describes the passage from the transient phenomenal world to that of ultimate Nirvana, a passage which is obtained through knowing the mind, and one which mirrors that from Life to Death.<sup>10</sup>

In his early work, Wentz suggests that the Temple represents Death in the midst of life. This is not an abhorrent death of decay and meaningless extinction; but the vital Death which empowers and sustains the living. It is the archetypal symbolism of the Sacrifice. According to this perception, the Doorway to the Temple is, in effect, the very Gates of Death. To enter the Temple is to consciously die; to be within the Temple is to be within the realm of Death.



*Figure 3 : Detail of architectural ornaments above the new residence of the Dalai Lama, the Kam-sun-siln-de (Welfare and Abundance) in the Norbulingka, built 1950 (after Jisl, Tibetan Art, photo Vladimir Sis & Jan Vanis)*

This cyclic process of death, intermediary region, and rebirth leads ultimately through meritorious action to an absolute transcendence from the realm of impermanence. Its significance is that it represents initiation into a more enlightened state of being, on the path to final and total Enlightenment. Monks, as technicians of the Sacred, mediate the great cosmic realms of Life and Death. They enter into Death, and intercede to guide the (illusory) soul of the newly dead to a more meritorious rebirth. In life, they guide the living soul in its arduous quest for the Absolute. Thus the monastic community, and the individual monk, come to be considered as Sacred.

Liturgical and gnostic dimensions are evident within the master, or Guru, as within the Temple. Tucci points out that while the Guru transmits the word and passes on the teaching, he is also the master who confers power through initiation or consecration. While the Temple is the repository and vehicle for the teaching, it is also saturated with the immediate presence of the Real. That power is available to the pilgrim, to enable and sustain his or her spiritual passage from temporal plane to the timeless plane of Nirvana.

It is in this sense that we contemplate the beautiful bracketed doorways to the Temple.<sup>11</sup> They may be read symbolically, as meaningful constructs with multiple levels of interpretation. But they are also experienced directly. These are portals which purify, which cleanse the eye and the heart and the soul. They are both fruit of, and pathway towards, a more enlightened state of being.





Figure 4 : Bracketed construction of the Ribok'ang Cathedral in Lhasa (after Jisl, Tibetan Art, photo Vladimir Sis & Jan Vanis)

Their rich harmonies of colour, proportion, and texture allude to vibrational modes of excitation of consciousness. These harmonies directly facilitate apprehension of and realisation of the Sacred. They are indicative of a Sacred architecture which provides an adequate support for contemplation, and therefore engenders a true and pure harmony of consciousness. Such harmonies of architecture profoundly affect the human soul, and lead it towards identification with its true nature. This identification is the certain, though distant, fruit of conscientious performance of the Cycle of Religious Duties.

These works of Sacred architecture may then be understood ~ they represent most precious exemplars of the Aesthetics of Enlightenment.

*Ah! But, I hear you say, you ignore the destruction of more than 5,000 monasteries in recent years.*

*Do you pretend that this is of no account, and take refuge in romantic attachment to the past?*

*No, I painfully remind you, all existence is suffering! All phenomena are transient! Taking refuge in the Buddha, what harm can befall our true Self?*

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- 1 *The Role of the Buddhist Stupa and Meditative Practices in the Design of Sacred Architecture - with reference to the Chorten of Zaskar/Ladakh*, subsequently published as Ch.2 of my *Radical Tradition ~ Seven Essays...*, The Opoutere Press, Boulder & Auckland, 2nd Ed, 1989.
- 2 See A.K. Coomaraswamy on *the Traditional Doctrine of Art*. Golgonooza Press, Ipswich, 1977.
- 3 See Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa, Introduction: 1. The Nature of Symbolism*. Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1985.
- 4 David Snellgrove, *Buddhist Himalaya*. Bruno Cassirer, Oxford, 1957.
- 5 Giuseppe Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1970.
- 6 See my *Radical Tradition*, op. cit., Ch.1.
- 7 Thubten Legshay Gyatsho, *Gateway to the Temple - A Requisite Manual for Faith and Adherence to the Buddhist Teaching*. Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu, 1979.
- 8 W. E. Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*. Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1973.
- 9 W. E. Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Oxford University Press, London, 1960.
- 10 W. E. Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*. Oxford University Press, London, 1954.
- 11 See for example: Mike Harding, *Footloose in the Himalaya*. Michael Joseph, London, 1989 (cover photo: *The Camp at Thyangboche*); Romi Khosla, *Buddhist Monasteries in the Western Himalaya*. Bibliotheca Himalayica Series III Vol. 13. Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu, 1979; Lumír Jisl, *Tibetan Art*. Spring Books, London (fig.26); Jamyang, *New-Sun Self-Learning Book on the Art of Tibetan Painting*. Tibetan Home's Foundation, Happy Valley, Mussoorie, 1982.