

## **Buddhist Traditions in Bhutan**

### A Brief Introduction

Buddhism plays perhaps the most prominent role in Bhutanese culture and society today. People's worldview, mindset, values, principles, practices and state policies and programmes are largely shaped by Buddhism. Buddhist ideals and concepts inform the meaning and purpose of life for most people in Bhutan although such ethos and practices are increasingly facing new challenges from the secular, materialistic, individualistic and anthropocentric value systems spreading through the new globalized world order. Bhutan's Buddhist system can be only properly appreciated by looking at the historical development of spiritual traditions in Bhutan from the Pre-Buddhist times and the diffusion of Buddhism to the formation of Bhutan's Buddhist state and the recent encounter between the Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist systems, which constitute tradition, and the new secular, global, and scientific modernity. The following is a brief account adapted from an essay on Bhutan's religious history written about two decades ago.

### **Pre-Buddhist Era**

The spiritual cultures of Bhutan before the arrival of Buddhism are heavily obscured and transformed by later developments and accretions for one to say anything definite. Apart from some archaic practices surviving in the form of local folk beliefs, rituals and cultures, there is hardly any historical documentation of the religious developments, norms and practices before the advent of Buddhism. It is highly implausible that an established religious system or institution existed in Bhutan before the 7<sup>th</sup> century apart from the diverse folk beliefs and rituals known in different regions and localities. Because of some family resemblance to, and perhaps also due to some degree of influence from the Bon religion, these local folk beliefs and practices came to be categorized as Bon — a term which we must remember mainly refers to the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet although the institutionalized Bon tradition had only a sporadic presence in Bhutan.

We can speculate on the grounds of extant beliefs and practices in some remote parts of the country that religious practices in this era consisted of various strands of shamanism, paganism, nature, spirit and idol worship. Although replaced by or sometimes assimilated into Buddhist beliefs and practices, traces of these strands still exist in folk cultures. In this system, nature featured as a powerful and indomitable force to be reckoned with. Mountains, lakes, cliffs, rivers, forests and valleys were seen as formidable abodes of non-human spirits such as *nedag*, *zhidag*, *pholha*, *yullha*, *dud*, *tsan*, *klu*, etc. They possessed almost the entire surroundings and often preyed on the human population, and people negotiated their relationship with these forces of nature through various rituals of appeasement and offering, and communicated with them through the medium of shamans and oracles such as *pabos*, *pamos* and *terdags*.

The worship of spirits through offerings and sacrifices and deployment of shamanic intermediary can be seen even today although the latter practice is in a rapid decline. Many of the seasonal rituals and rites of deity pacification have become assimilated into mainstream Buddhist practices and today continue in their Buddhicized versions, with the original elements of nature worship remaining hidden or forgotten today. Yet, the Pre-Buddhist spiritual cultures of Bhutan have left a significant impact on the spiritual life in general and the character of Buddhist system in Bhutan. Bhutanese Buddhist tradition can be only fully appreciated by understanding its interaction and relationship to the spiritual cultures which existed in the country when Buddhist arrived. Also, the country's acclaim of having pristine

environment and being a carbon-negative nation can be properly appreciated only by understanding the nature-oriented Pre-Buddhist spirituality in Bhutan.

### **The Early Phase of Buddhism (8<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> Century)**

The first signs of Buddhist religion in Bhutan are the two temples of Jampa Lhakhang in Bumthang and Kyerchu Lhakhang in Paro, monuments which are believed to have been built by the Tibetan Emperor Srongtsen Gampo (c. 605-50). The arrival of the Indian master Padmasambhava to Bhutan in the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century marked the proper advent of Buddhism to Bhutan. Two most important religious sites and hundreds of others are related to this master and devotion, prayers and offerings to him form the rudiments of Bhutanese Buddhism. Although there are no historical records of change brought by his mission, oral traditions have it that people took lay Buddhist vows and gave up animal sacrifices.

In the centuries after Padmasambhava's journeys to Bhutan, hundreds of Buddhist masters from Tibet poured into the region in search of new territories for conversion, economic opportunities to support large religious establishments in Tibet, solitudes to practice Buddhist teachings away from the stress and strife in Central Tibet, and religious treasures which are believed to have been hidden by Padmasambhava and his cohort in the 8<sup>th</sup> and early 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among them were masters from the new Sarma schools of Tibetan Buddhism including Myos Lhanangpa of Drigung Kagyu, Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo and other Drukpa Kagyu masters, Gonpo Dorji and others visitors from Nenyang, Barawa Gyaltsen Palzang and his successors, Thangtong Gyalpo the bridge builder, the Sakyapa masters and numerous others who brought the new Sarma schools of Tibetan Buddhism including Drukpa Kagyu, the state religion of Bhutan. Around the same, the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which claimed transmission from the early diffusion in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century, widely spread in Bhutan through masters such as Longchenpa, Guru Chowang, Dorji Lingpa, Kathog Lamas, and subsequently produced local figures such as Padma Lingpa (1450-1521), the foremost religious master Bhutan ever produced.

### **The Later Phase of Buddhism (17<sup>th</sup> Century onwards)**

The later phase is the period of formalization and consolidation of Buddhist centres and systems in Bhutan starting in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651), the founder of Bhutan, escaped from Tibet and started his mission in Bhutan leading to the unification of the country. Zhabdrung and his coterie unified the valleys roughly into the country we know today mainly with the aim of having a church state to support the Drukpa Kagyu school and continue the hereditary monastic institution which existed in Ralung, his home in Tibet. Under his supervision, the dual system of governance with the temporal and spiritual branches of the state was established mostly led by the clergy, and the Drukpa Kagyu denomination of the Kagyu tradition became the state religion of Bhutan and most other sects, except the Nyingmapas and Sakyapas, declined gradually or were forcefully banished from Bhutan. The state ecclesiastical body or the State Monk Body, which continues today, was established as a religious community as well as state administrative body. In the following centuries, branches of the State Monk Body were founded in all districts, thus spreading Drukpa Kagyu tradition across the whole country.

The formation of the Bhutanese state with the monastic governance led to the development of a formal political institution led by the position of the head of state which was mostly occupied by a Zhabdrung lama and which the British referred to as the Dharma Raja, and supported by the administrative head, the Desi or what the British called the Deb Raja and the

chief abbot of Je Khenpo, the ecclesiastical head which continues to this day. The centralized governance and state support also engendered artistic and cultural creations including the construction of the massive fortified *dzong* structures, numerous religious artefacts such as statues, books and ritual implements, and also a vibrant literary activity including the writing of Bhutan's first national history. Society was roughly divided into a small upper class of religious nobilities and political leaders, a major section of tax paying households and the lowest category of landless tenants and slaves who worked for the landed gentry.

Through the centuries, Buddhism gradually penetrated into the remote corners of Bhutan and begun to shape all aspects of the Bhutanese society. On an individual level, Buddhism informed their worldviews, value systems, purpose of life and their general outlook on themselves, others and the world as a whole. It heavily influenced their lifestyle and social behaviour and their sense of space and time. For example, people would wake up in the morning to say prayers, make water offering and/or circumambulate a temple and often stop agricultural work on full moon and new moon days to spend the time carrying out religious work. Communal events became mostly ceremonies of Buddhist religious worship and practices. Buddhist topics were also the main content of art, and architectural designs were often based on Buddhist themes. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, even the system of political governance and law became intricately linked to the Buddhist institutions and practices.

### **The Current Situation**

Today, Bhutan claims to be the only country with Mahāyāna Buddhism as its state religion and the two traditions of Nyingma and Drukpa Kagyu flourish fairly amicably. Within the Nyingma, there are many sub-sects which are defined more by their line of transmission than by doctrinal difference. The Nyingthig tradition, which started with Longchenpa in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, continues to flourish as does the Peling tradition, Bhutan's native religious tradition which started with Pema Lingpa. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Tersar tradition of Dudjom Lingpa was promoted by his reincarnation Dudjom Rinpoche and his descendants. There are also other Nyingma traditions such as Jangter and Palyul being taken up by some monastic institutions in Bhutan.

In contrast, the Drukpa Kagyu school in Bhutan has remained virtually homogenous through the centuries and the tradition continues to flourish both in terms of widespread presence across Bhutan and institutional membership although the State Monk Body has by now lost all political influence they once exercised. There is also a new connection now unfolding between the Drukpa Kagyu of Bhutan and that of Tibet/Ladakh originating from Zhabdrung's rival despite their difference in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Among the southern Bhutanese, there is significant population of Hindus and the number of people embracing Christianity is also on the rise.

The nature-oriented Pre-Buddhist spirituality and the mind-centred Buddhist tradition of Bhutan is today at the most difficult juncture and facing the most rapid changes. The transition from animistic Pre-Buddhist worldview to the Buddhist worldview happened in a gradual process lasting over a millennium. The integration of the Buddhist system into the local Pre-Buddhist context and the coalescence of the two spiritual traditions took place also with much astuteness, wisdom and sustained negotiation. However, today Bhutan is going through a rapid and chaotic transition from its traditional spiritual systems to more secular and materialistic worldview, spread by modern education and global information deluge. This cultural shift is taking place within the greater context of Bhutan's overarching changes, economically from a subsistence farming to a capitalist and consumerist market economy,

geopolitically from isolated hermit kingdom to globalized member, socially from a completely rural community setting to large a urban settlement, politically from a medieval monarchy to a bicameral democracy, and from a largely oral past to an audio-visual present. As the modern pursuit of materialistic growth driven by the capitalist market economy, individualistic tendency heightened by urban self-centred lifestyle, and the anthropocentric outlook fueled by alien dogmas and technological advancement spread across the country, Bhutan's Pre-Buddhist tradition showing great deference to the visible and invisible denizens of nature and the Buddhist culture focusing on the inner state of the mind as the main ingredient of happiness and wellbeing face the enormous forces of change sweeping across the country.

While many have come to appreciate and leverage the traditional spiritual traditions as strong bulwarks against global challenges such as social fragmentation, economic inequity, climate change, and so forth, the vast majority of the people have resigned themselves to the global trends and many even actively indulge in decadence, vanity and excesses of consumerism presented by the 21<sup>st</sup> century global society. At such juncture, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness, which at times appears to be losing its sheen among the local people including the youth and some leaders, continues to epitomize the nature-and-mind-centred culture of the past and serves as a beacon of holistic development process combining modernity with tradition, outer material comfort with inner spiritual wellbeing, and captures the imagination of the post-modern sustainability thinkers and seekers around the world.