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Cover Photo: Head of Buddha from Fouilles de Hadda, Afghanistan.
Third to Fourth Century. The Bettman Archive.
Compositor: Scratchgravel Publishing Services
Printer: Malloy Lithographing, Inc.



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3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10—99 98 97 96

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The experience of Buddhism : sources and interpretations / John S. Strong.

p. cm. — (Religious life in history series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-534-19164-9

1. Buddhism. I. Strong, John. II. Series.

BQ122.E97 1994

294.3—dc20

94-6258
CIP

The Experience of Buddhism

Sources and Interpretations

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Wadsworth Publishing Company
Belmont, California
A Division of Wadsworth, Inc.

oneself. It is not the time to follow mere words; it is time to meditate on their true significance. It is not the time to be drifting; it is time to remain firm at one place.

Source: Reprinted by permission of the publisher from "Sayings of Atiśa B," trans. in *Alaka Chattopadhyaya, Atiśa and Tibet* (Calcutta: Indian Studies: Past and Present, 1967), pp. 540-42, 544 (slightly altered).⁹⁵

7.5 RITUALS AND FESTIVALS

7.5.1 Pilgrimage to Mount Kailāsa

Among the many meritorious practices engaged in by Buddhists everywhere, the ritual of going on pilgrimage occupies an important and distinctive position. From Sri Lanka to Japan, Buddhist Asia is dotted with sacred sites that like magnets with various degrees of strength, attract devotees and visitors.

In Tibet, one of the most powerful magnets for pilgrims (second perhaps only to the city of Lhasa) is Mount Kailāsa, the peak in the western Himalayas that the Tibetans call Gang Ti-se or Gang Rimpoché. Reputed to be located at the center of the world, and so to correspond to the Mount Meru of cosmological schemes, Gang Ti-se is a physically striking dome of almost twenty-two thousand feet that for centuries has attracted not only Buddhists and Bon-po from Tibet but Hindus from India as well.

For Tibetans it is also legendarily associated with the figure of Milārepa (see 7.9), and for that reason perhaps it is especially popular with members of the Ka-gyū-pa sect. But devotees of all denominations will journey hundreds of miles, often on foot, to reach the mountain. There, two features of Tibetan religious practice come to the fore: circumambulation and prostration.

The practice of circumambulation, going around a sacred object or site such as a stūpa or a temple (for Buddhists, this is always done in a clockwise direction), is a common act of veneration. On the Gang Ti-se pilgrimage, it is the mountain itself that is circumambulated, usually several times, on a circuit that covers over thirty miles. Prostration (placing one's body full length on the ground) is another common act of worship and discipline among Tibetans, and certain sacred sites are even equipped with special prostration boards on which this practice can be performed, often hundreds or even thousands of times. At Gang Ti-se, successive grand prostrations are used by some pilgrims as the means for advancing, body length by body length, all the way around the mountain, thereby measuring the entire circumambulation route with their own prostrate persons.

The following account of the Gang Ti-se pilgrimage by a Japanese sociologist, university professor, explorer, and mountaineer, Kazuhiko Tamamura, describes both the circumambulation route and the practice of prostration as he observed them in 1985.

⁹⁵Original text: *Atiśa and Tibet*, pp. 555-60.

What is known as the Gang Rimpoché [Mount Kailāsa] pilgrimage involves circumambulating the circumference of the sacred peak any number of times. . . . The pilgrims, coming from various directions, "appear" in Tarchen, the village near the base of the mountain [which serves as the takeoff point for the circumambulation path]. The word "appear" is entirely appropriate, for these people pay no attention to existing roads and simply take the shortest route. Some of them arrive, driving several dozen sheep on which they have loaded their baggage; some ride on horseback or in trucks or tractors; but the vast majority of them come on foot, their belongings on their back neatly packed in panniers made of willow branches. They carry staffs or tent poles in their hands in order to drive off ferocious dogs.

Except for those pilgrims travelling alone or in very small groups, most of the parties bring with them tents of white cotton cloth. As soon as they arrive in Tarchen, they set up these tents . . . and begin searching for fuel, yak dung, which they collect and carry in the folds of their aprons or shepherds' robes.

The fatigue of the long journey they have made to reach Tarchen is great [some have come on foot from Eastern Tibet as much as three thousand kilometers away], but the very next day after their arrival, they set out on the Gang Rimpoché pilgrimage circuit with eager anticipation. Their fervent desire to make the circuit of the holy mountain as soon as possible prompts them to take to the road again. . . .

The pilgrimage route around Gang Rimpoché is 52 kilometers long. If you were to extend your arms in front of you to make a circle corresponding to the route, Tarchen would be where your head is, and Gang Rimpoché itself would tower majestically from a spot just inside of the place where the tips of your fingers meet. The pilgrimage route thus leaves from Tarchen, at an altitude of 4,700 meters, follows the La Chu River upstream (corresponding to your left arm), crosses the Dorna Pass at 5,600 meters [located roughly where your right hand would be], and returns to Tarchen along a course that follows the Son Chu River (your right arm).

Tibetans make this circumambulation in one fourteen-hour day. If they were to spend the night on the road, they would require a good deal of baggage including their tents, so they choose to go all out and make the circuit in a day. It is also considered to be more meritorious to make the trip in a single day. . . . They make the circumambulation with the same joy and high spirits that we associate with going on a picnic, and return to Tarchen in the evening. Then, after resting in Tarchen for a day or two, they once again make the circuit. In this way, they go around the sacred mountain many times [13 and 26 times are popular numbers], and so end up staying in Tarchen for quite a long while. . . .

I myself had been thinking of taking up the challenge of the pilgrimage route and [after a few days interviewing pilgrims in Tarchen] I set out with plans to spend two nights and three days on the road. . . . In addition to my interpreter-guide, Dorje, I employed the services of two

young men, Tashi (21) and Norbu (16) as porters. We set out from Tarchen on May 27th. . . . [At first] the way was virtually flat. There were no trees except for a shrub about fifty centimeters high called tama, and in general plants were of limited variety and few in number. . . .

A little while after leaving Tarchen, we encountered an old man coming from the opposite direction. Tibetan *Buddhists* make clockwise circumambulations, and so [since this man was going counterclockwise], I took him for a follower of the Bon religion [who do their circumambulations in a widdershins way]. It turned out, however, that he was a volunteer helping to rebuild the Chuk Gompa (monastery-temple), and was simply on his way back to Tarchen from work.

The peak of Gang Rimpoché had been visible from Tarchen, but it was now hidden by the foothills and we were not able to see it at all until we arrived at Changya Gang. At Changya Gang, there was a big pile of stones—some of them “mani stones” on which the mantra “OM MANI PADME HÜM” was written. Above the pitch-black hills that provided a backdrop for the stones, the white snow of Gang Rimpoché could be seen. The striking contrast was beautiful. Dorje faced the mountain and recited sūtras for about fifteen minutes.

From Changya Gang . . . it was forty minutes to Tarboche where a big festival called “Shaka Dawa” is held on the birthday of Śākyamuni. From there, it also took less than an hour to get to Chuk Gompa. . . . After leaving Tarchen that morning, we had met [besides the old man who was not a Bon-po] a number of village youths who were returning from having carried logs from Tarchen to Chuk Gompa [in order to rebuild the temple there]. In the past, there had been five gompa [monasteries] around Gang Rimpoché, but they had all been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. . . . Tibet is now [1985] actively rebuilding its gompas. At the prefectural level, the decision was made to rebuild at the rate of two or three gompas a year; in the vicinity of Gang Rimpoché, Chuk Gompa in the West and Zurufuk Gompa in the East, were targeted for reconstruction this year. . . .

Chuk Gompa was located in the hills across the river. Since it had been completely demolished, I would probably have passed the spot without noticing it if Dorje had not pointed it out. . . . According to Ekai Kawaguchi [the Japanese Zen monk who visited this area in 1903], this gompa, which was under the control of the King of Bhutan, had the largest income of all the temples of its day, but now it was but a mound of debris. I stood on top of this rubble and gazed at Gang Rimpoché looming before me. The gompa was located so that the south slope of the Holy Mountain could be seen at an angle. The vertical line of the face rising to the summit was truly like a ladder to heaven. Before it stood the crag known as the “Son of Gang Rimpoché,” and the crag in the shape of a divine monkey in constant prayer. When I gazed below at the stacks of logs brought by the young people, they looked very small indeed.

From Chuk Gompa, the valley narrowed dramatically. . . . Many pilgrims had already overtaken us on the way. We now came across a party of three young people who had passed us some time before and were just finishing a meal by the river and preparing to set out again. The three

were from the northern plateau of Chang Thang. After I finished interviewing them, . . . they set off at a brisk pace, spinning prayer wheels in their right hands and intoning “OM MANI PADME HÜM.”

At Dirapūr Gompa [also destroyed during the Cultural Revolution], Gang Rimpoché appears as an enormous dome rising up from behind two hills on the left and right. The north face looms large and one has to strain to look upwards to take it in. . . . There is a narrow band of rock that runs along the center of the dome, rising upward towards the right. “Long ago, an evil deity lived on Gang Rimpoché. He took the mountain on his back and started to carry it to Sri Lanka.” There was emotion in Dorje’s voice as he offered this explanation. “Look, you can see the marks of the rope he used. But then Śākyamuni came here and persuaded the deity to change his mind. There is nothing that the Buddha cannot do. You remember the footprint of Śākyamuni which we saw on the way to Thamdon Dongang? There are footprints of Śākyamuni in four places around Gang Rimpoché. They tell us that no one can ever take the mountain away again.”

The Buddha’s footprint at Thamdon Dongang had been large, three or four times bigger than a normal human foot.

“Is it because Śākyamuni came here that Gang Rimpoché is a sacred mountain?”

“It is not holy just because Śākyamuni came here. Gang Rimpoché is at the center of the Himalayas. It is at the center of the world. . . .”

From Dirapūr, the way follows a branch of the La Chu called the Dorna La Chu. “La” means “pass” and the name means “the river that flows from the Dorna Pass.” The left bank of the river was blocked by a large mound of sand so we were obliged to cross over to the right hand side. [We then spent the night, camping out at Charok Dongang.]

The next day, the weather was fair, without a cloud in the sky. Viewed from Charok Dongang, Gang Rimpoché was beautiful, the snow on the crest golden in the light of the early morning sun. I gazed at it transfixed for several minutes, even as I shivered in the cold.

From Charok Dongang to the Dorna Pass, the grade becomes steep and the altitude rises sharply. The path crosses a small river many times, and a thin film of ice had formed on the water. There was snow, but it was the consistency of slush. . . . We arrived at the top of the Dorna La at 10:40 after two hours of hard struggle. My altimeter measured 5,480 meters. There were many pilgrims at the pass. There was a huge boulder there that looked as though it had been dropped from heaven. The pilgrims circumambulated the boulder which was decorated with prayer flags and locks of human hair. Not just people but horses too were making the clockwise circuit of the boulder. But [as I was feeling unwell] I was not up to conducting any interviews and could only think of making the descent as quickly as possible.

The path going down from the Dorna La is very precipitous. The slope is so steep that it looked as though the pilgrims who were doing their circumambulation in grand prostrations [see below] were about to plunge head first down the mountain. Before us rose an imposing black peak punctuated by several sharp crags. . . .

At the bottom we arrived at a place called Shapje Daktok. It had taken us an hour and twenty minutes to reach it.

Near the confluence of the Son Chu, we encountered a group of four young monks who were making the circumambulation doing grand prostrations. They said that they were from Ch'ing Hai Province [in north-west China]. [Later] we were overtaken by several parties of pilgrims. Before coming to Tarchen I had visited a farm family living near the border between Tibet and Nepal. The daughter of the family was in one of the groups that passed us. It was a group composed of four women. They went on singing songs as though they were on a hike. They told us they had all set out from Tarchen that morning. I suppose that without this sort of speed, it would not be possible for Tibetans to make the circumambulation in one day.

As we came out from the hills, the view opened dramatically. Before us was the peak of Namunani. The sight of it catching the evening sun encouraged me and [happy that I could finish my circuit of the mountain that night, a day early], I set out for the Tarchen resthouse and the sleep it promised. [...]

A Note on Grand Prostrations

The special feature of the Tibetan Buddhists' grand prostration is the repetition with which it is performed. In front of a temple, around a temple, facing holy ground, around holy ground, and, at times, on the way to temples and holy areas, the grand prostration is repeated constantly time and again. I could not help feeling a sense of awe at the rigorous and strenuous nature of the practice of Tibetan Buddhists which involved completing the 52 kilometer circuit around Gang Rimpoché by making grand prostrations.

In Tibetan, this type of practice is called "kyang chak." "Kyang" means "to extend the body," and "chak" means "to worship." First, one holds one's two hands together on top of one's head, and one prays: "May the sins that I have committed up until now with this body be cleansed." Then one lowers the hands cupping them in front of one's face, and one says: "May the sins that I have committed up until now with this mouth be cleansed." Then one lowers one's hands further to chest level and says: "May the sins that I have committed up until now with this mind be cleansed." Then one falls to one's knees, forcefully extends the body forward, reaching the hands out as far as possible and bringing the palms together while flat on one's face. Then, getting up, one advances to the point to which one's hands extended, and one repeats the whole thing again. Each time, one can only move the distance one has measured out with one's body. Thus the ground that can be covered in a day is not very great. They say that it takes two weeks to cover the 52 kilometers around Gang Rimpoché by this method. ... In the course of the circuit, any number of fords across rivers need to be made, but the pilgrims keep up their grand prostrations right across the stones in the stream.

Of the 145 pilgrims that I interviewed [during my stay in Tarchen], six had already gone around the mountain doing grand prostrations, [and

twelve more were planning to do so,] including two nuns from Nepal. ... If we assume that those who said they were going to do the prostrations did so, we can conclude that about 10% of the pilgrims around Gang Rimpoché make the circuit by prostrations.

Source: Translated and reprinted by permission of the author from Kazuhiko Tamamura, *Seizan Junrei* (Tokyo: Yama to Keikoku Sha, 1987), pp. 41-53, 147.

7.5.2 Magical Rites: Casting Spells

As we saw in 6.5, Buddhist ritual was not only directed toward venerating the Buddha, making merit, and achieving enlightenment. It could also be used for more down-to-earth purposes: for magical defense against evil spirits or wild animals or, conversely, for magical offense against beings whom one desired to subjugate. In India, the lines between mantras, magic, and meditation were sometimes difficult to draw. For example, the meditative practice of extending loving kindness (*maitrī*) toward all sentient beings was commonly applied in a very practical way: it was used in encounters with snakes or dangerous beasts who, suffused by the meditator's quiet love, decided that this human was no threat and went away. The amulets and spells described in the following Tibetan ritual manual, dating from around the tenth century C.E., are somewhat more active in nature and are directed toward a variety of ends, some of them more "worldly" than others.

To scare away snakes. On the lower step of the threshold, inscribe a triangle and another triangle upon that to form a six-pointed star: starting from the east, ... write the six seeds [syllables] of the mantra [OM KURUKULE HRĪṬ] at the six corners [of the star], with the seeds of the Law [SVĀ HĀ] in the midst thereof, and the syllable PHUḤ between them.

For a woman to subjugate her husband. On white birchbark, or on a cloth stained with menstrual blood, draw a seven-petaled lotus and write the seven syllables OM KU RU KU LLE SVĀ HĀ on the seven petals; and in the center of the lotus, between two HRĪṬs, write the name of the person to be subjugated; then roll it up into a little ball and fasten it upon the upper arm:

and the husband becomes the woman's slave
even a king becomes her servant
but only a woman who is pure and virtuous
may apply this mantra.

An amulet of protection. Draw a four-petaled lotus flower on a piece of birchbark: on the eastern petal draw an arrow, on the southern petal a bow, on the western petal a hand in the fearless gesture, and on the northern petal a lotus flower. Draw a moon in the center of the four petals and write thereon the name of the person to be protected, surrounded by the seven seeds OM KU RU KU LLE SVĀ HĀ. Draw a garland of lotus flowers all