How to Cite:
Ruangsan, N., Klalod, P. D., Meethaisong, T., Ketnakorn, P. S., Samantapasatiko, P. S., & Hanpong, P. N. (2021). Cultural review: the role and status of the deities in Tibetan Buddhist practice. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, *5*(S1), 609-616.
https://doi.org/10.37028/lingcure.v5nS1.1445

Cultural Review: The Role and Status of the Deities in Tibetan Buddhist Practice

Niraj Ruangsan
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, Thailand

Phramaha Daosayam Klalod
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, Thailand

Theerapong Meethaisong
Mahasarakham University, Mahasarakham, Thailand

Phrabaidika Suphot Ketnakorn
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, Thailand

Phramaha Sarayut Samantapasatiko
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, Thailand

Phramaha Natthabhan Hanpong
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, Thailand

***Abstract*---**In the Tibetan Buddhist context, a pantheon of deities is recognized to be a legitimate refuge. The question of why the status of the deities has become, over the long history of Buddhism in Tibet, equal to the Triratna is not easy to answer. This paper investigates the role and status of deities in Tibetan Buddhist practice. The finding suggests that the status and role of the Tibetan deities are connected to the Tulku tradition and the Trikāya system. The deities exist in two classes: the class of enlightened beings and the class of non-enlightened beings. They constitute the Sambhogakāya in the Trikāya system. Externally, the deities of both classes are involved with their worshippers socially and spiritually as providers of wealth and security, as teachers, protectors, guardians, advisers and even as a kind of refuge. Internally, the status and roles of the deities are concerned with internal spiritual attainment.

***Keywords*---**deities, enlightened beings, role, status, Tibetan Buddhism.

***Corresponding author**: Ruangsan, N.; Email: niraj_rs@outlook.com*
Manuscript submitted: 09 April 2021, Manuscript revised: 18 July 2021, Accepted for publication: 27 August 2021

Introduction

In 1975, after a period of intense research, the 14th Dalai Lama began to issue warnings about the deity worship of Dorje Shugden. The reasons given were that a sectarian movement had developed from the practice and that this somewhat fierce archetypal figure was not a worthy figure in which to take refuge (Lama, 2015). It is well known by now that a virtual pantheon of deities is considered in Tibet to be a legitimate refuge. Until the beginning of the tantric era, only the Triratna of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha were domains where refuge could be sought and found (Pedersen & Baruffati, 1989; Birley, 1985).

While supernatural beings have always appeared in Buddhist texts, some deities were considered to be just phantom or spiritual beings. The popularity of Dorje Shugden highlights the fact that two distinct levels are involved in understanding the Tibetan gods. The external level refers to the natural, social and spiritual status of the deities, the way they are prayed to for mundane purposes, for example. The internal refers to the deities as they exist in the state of meditative practice (Sexton & Bowman-Upton, 1990; Chopra et al., 1983).

The external level

Natural status of the Tibetan deities: In Buddhist cosmology, the deities are divided into the realms of heaven, the Rūpabrama-realms and Arūpabrama-realms (Thera, 2004). In Tibetan Buddhism, they are divided into the worldly or mundane deities (jig rten pa'i srung ma) and the supra-mundane deities (jig rten las 'das pa'i srung ma). The supra-mundane deities are manifestations of enlightened beings and Buddhas. In other words, they are the gods and goddesses who have passed beyond the six spheres of existence (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956). The mundane deities are the deities who are still residing within the spheres inhibited by animated beings, Kay (1997), they take an active part in the religious life of Tibet. The deities of both levels are above the level of beings with gross physical bodies and are frequently called the 'haughty ones' (dregs pa) (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956; Powers, 2007; Willson & Brauen, 2001; Brauen & Willson, 2000).

Michael Von Brück points out that the beings of the higher level are "emanations (sprul pa) of the highest aspects of the Buddha" while some "are only local ghosts" (Von Brück, 2001). However, both are known as dharmapālas or guardians. The beings of the internal level, the higher dharmapālas, have passed beyond Samsara and possess 'universal appearance' and significance while those of the external level still dwell in samsara. These lower dharmapālas, sometimes fierce and destructive, have been 'tamed and bound by oaths'; Von Brück (2001), their powers have been harnessed. But while their domain of activity is still the realm of Samsara, they do not have gross physical bodies and so must use human 'mediums' who can achieve trance-like states to make contact with the world of humans (Von Brück, 2001).

The complexity of the conceptualization of the external status and roles of the Tibetan deities suggests that the comprehension of deities may be differentiated based on the interpretation of the viewers. The deities may be classified as high-

level beings and even as part of the Buddhist refuge, but they may also be classified simply as minor worldly deities. This means that the status of deities is sometimes uncertain because it can be reevaluated by their worshippers. For example, the Dorje Shugden was historically a mundane deity (Von Brück, 2001). He resided in the lower realm. However, later on, his status was re-evaluated by the 5th Dalai Lama, in the seventeenth century CE, as a Buddha (Kay, 1997).

The general roles of the Tibetan deities, both gods and goddesses, are often referred to by means of two key terms. The first is as the protectors of religious law (Tb. chos skyong, Skt. dharmapāla, dvārapāla) (Bum, 2016; Kuznetsov & Frye, 1981; Lingpa et al., 2020). The other, which is used more frequently, is as the guardians of the Buddhist doctrine. In this case the deities can sometimes be very harmful and are often recognized as non-Buddhist spirits. Some are bound by an oath and can be subdued and compelled to assume the position of protectors of the Buddha Dharma. In this position they are normally depicted in their fierce aspect, brandishing weapons and crushing the human or supernatural enemies of Buddhism under their feet (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956). Some are protectors of the state; for instance, the Pe Har deity who is a well-known ancient god of the mundane level (jig rten pa'i srung ma) has come to occupy a prominent position in the religious systems of all Tibetan Buddhism schools (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956). Some are the protectors of particular Tibetan Buddhist schools such as Palden Lhamo who is the protective goddess of the Gelukpa tradition (Kay, 1997). Similarly, Dorje Shugden is significant for the Gelukpa and Sakya schools. In particular, the Gelukpa school claims that he is a powerful guardian and protector of their doctrine against any detrimental influence that comes from the older Nyingmapa school (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956). The deity is often considered a teacher and advisor, an aspect that connects him with the tulku tradition. The 14th Dalai Lama refers to his deity adviser Nechung, the state Oracle, by saying that:

> Even if my master says something I compare it with what Je Tsongkhapa said and examine it on that basis. Likewise, I do not right away believe, even if it is said by a dharma protector. I think about it and do divination, I am very careful. Some may think that I am easily believing everything that Nechung says, but this is not so. It is said that we Gelukpas appreciate the power of conventional reason¬ing. So we have to keep up with it. Hence it has to be questioned whether Shugden is the reincarnation of Tulku Drakpa Gyaltsen or not (Von Brück, 2001).

In regard to the issue of the deity being a guru, the connection of the Dorje Shugden deity to the Tulku concept may be one of the best examples. Dorje Shugden is seen as belonging to the pantheon of the Tulku Drakpa Gyaltsen who has been recognized as the reincarnation of a disciple of the 2nd Dalai Lama, Panchen Sonam Drakpa (1478-1554). In the Trikāya system, without doubt, he is recognized as the Nirmanakāya of the Buddha (Xing, 2004; Hayashi, 1983; Saikawa, 1984; Gadjin & Umeyo, 1973). This Tulku, socially, is the teacher or even master who must still, after death, be respected as the teacher by his disciples. The social roles of deities are often discussed in terms of their service to society, as border guardians for example, who prevent hostile foreigners from entering the Forbidden Land or as the guardians of the holy places of pilgrimage.

Nevertheless, the Tibetan deity, even one who resides and functions in the samsaric realm, can become a refuge. The role of the deity is complex, especially on this external level, because the concept of the Tulku is related to the bodhisattva ideal and the Trikāya system. The deities are considered as the pantheon - and the Sambhogakaya - of the Tulku, who is one who has taken the bodhisattva vow to be reborn in the samsaric world in order to save sentient beings (Ray, 1986). The Tulku, as a Buddhist monk who is part of the Triratana and even the Nirmanakāya, possesses the same status after death and thus may be understood as an authentic entity in which to take refuge. For the Gelukpa monk, the deity is considered an emanation of Manjushri, the great Buddha of Vajrayana. Yet even with this elevated status, followers will still request mundane favors as well as taking refuge in the deeper spiritual sense of the Triratana saranam (Johnson,1986; Kumar, 2002).

Again, Dorje Shugden appears as an example. Paul Williams recognizes his dual aspect. On the one hand he is a protector of the Dharma, a fierce deity who sometimes takes on the form of a Gelukpa monk; he is an emanation of Manjushri who is himself an emanation of the Buddha. This in itself is not an unusual occurrence, the lower-level deity often being seen as an emanation of one higher. On the other hand, Dorje Shugden is a powerful but mundane deity who is 'not even a bodhisattva' and whose worship could descend into a kind of Buddhist 'demon-worship'. For Williams then, as for the Dalai Lama himself, to take refuge in such a worldly god can be "to abandon taking refuge solely in the Buddha and thus to abandon the very definition of being a Buddhist" (Williams, 1996). But the many different conceptualizations and personal interpretations of the deities at this external level produce a complex scenario in which the borderline between high-level spiritual beings and minor worldly deities is easily crossed.

The internal level

Nevertheless, on the truly internal level, the deity is the Sambhogakāya or 'Yidam' (Von Brtick, 1999; Lodu, 2011; Baimacou, 2021). The Yidam plays a significant role in meditative practice. It exists throughout all the levels of meditation, eventually leading to the highest goal of meditative practice which is achievement of the Dharmakāya (emptiness). Practitioners purposefully identify with the Yidam deity in order to transform their habitual and misguided self-images into a more diamantine self, a 'diamond body' that can "sustain repeated entry into exalted states of consciousness" (Blofeld, 1970). However, the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism vary in how they regard the practice of the Yidam deity. For the new Sarma school and particularly the Sakya school, one has to keep connecting to the particular Yidam via daily mantra recitation. Meanwhile, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche says that just as in the deity practice, if one realizes one Buddha, one automatically realizes all other Buddhas at the same time (Schmidt, 2004). It is here that the borderline between higher and lower might be encountered; when one spiritual being represents, or is an emanation of, another.

Deity meditation involves three contemplative techniques which lead to realization of the three bodies of the Trikāya system. They are; meditation on suchness, meditation on illumination and meditation on the seed syllable. The suchness

meditation leads to realization of the Dharmakāya, the illumination meditation leads to the Sambhogakāya (endowed with all major and minor marks of the Buddha) and the meditation on the seed syllable leads to realization of the Nirmanakāya. The deity plays an important role in all these forms. In the first, the deity is used as the object of visualization. In the second, also called the 'magical meditation', the practitioner experiences compassion as well as experiencing the deities as the body of the Buddha. In the third meditation, the seed syllable is the source of the entire mandala of deities (Schmidt, 2004). Deities are said to arise from the seed syllable (Shen et al., 2012; Allendorf et al., 2014).

During the process of learning and practicing visualization techniques, mental images are created that are "related to the spiritual goal" (Blofeld, 1970). These are later abandoned when the true goal is fully appreciated and can be meditated on directly. But the deities take on an enormous degree of significance when the adept succeeds in recognizing suññatā, the void. When reality is recognized as being fundamentally 'empty' while at the same time being a construction of the mind, the figures encountered in the sadhana process become more real, conventional reality becomes suññatā and this puts it on an equal standing with the imaginal world. 'Visions, dreams and imaginings' are 'more real' than sensory phenomena because they are more closely related to 'the real state of void' (Blofeld, 1970). The phenomena that are encountered during meditation – or even in dreaming - take on a numinosity and clarity that reveals an equal phenomenological status to the so-called 'things of the real world'.

We appear to see the world directly but what we really see is an internal reconstruction of the world, a conceptualization and a mapping of a world that we have been conditioned to perceive. Research in neuroscience now confirms this fundamental Buddhist perspective: the human nervous system 'brings forth a world' rather than grasping 'an external reality' (Maturana & Varela, 2012). When both the external and internal worlds are seen to be empty (because the nervous system is closed off in this way) it is hard to make a distinction 'between perception and hallucination' (Maturana & Varela, 2012). In other words; because the 'external world' is really an internal construction, its phenomena are only as real as the phenomena of dreams.

Indeed, the dream has become a popular metaphor for states induced by visualization. In the 'lucid dream', which happens most frequently when the dreamer is emerging from sleep, the dreamer becomes aware of this being only a dream (Austin, 1999). The person is conscious at the same time as sleeping and sees internal landscapes and archetypal figures. To study sleep is to focus attention on different states of cognition. If a person becomes lucidly aware of dreaming, or even remembers a dream, that person has had an experience somewhat similar to the phenomenological experience of a meditator. It is just an example of the many cognitive states to be mastered by the tantric practitioner: the levels and stages are clearly marked out (Hajicek-Dobberstein, 1995; Jennings, 2010).

In the nine-yāna practice of Nyingma tradition, the fourth yāna, Kriyayoga-yāna (the purification of the practitioners' body, speech and mind) has the deity as master and the practitioner as servant. The deity is visualized as exterior to

oneself and is worshipped as such. In the fifth yāna, Upayoga-yāna, the deity is still external, but more closely on a level with the practitioner, as friend or helper. In the sixth yāna, yoga-yāna, at the level of absolute truth, all phenomena are free of conceptualization and are empty and luminous. In this yāna, one visualizes oneself as the deity and all phenomena are equal. In the seventh yāna, Mahāyoga-yāna (the masculine principle), all manifestations, thoughts and appearances are accepted as the essence of mind and as the Dharmakāya. All phenomena are seen as the essence of the deities. However, in the eighth yāna, Anuyoga-yāna (the feminine principle), the deity visualization is not so much emphasized. In the ninth yāna, Atiyoga-yāna (nonduality of masculine and feminine principles), all entities are the same and are pure in the Dharmakāya (Ray, 2002).

The Kriyā Tantra of the Mādhyamika involves the generation of self into a deity and leads to realization of the sambhogakāya. The two realities, the Self Reality (ātma-tattva) and the God Reality (devatā-tattva) of the practitioner will generate the six gods or deities. These are the Reality God (tattva-devatā), the sound God (śabda-devatā), the Letter God (akṣara-devatā), the Form God (rūpa-devatā), the Seal God (mudrā-devatā) and the Sign-God (nimitta-devatā). Thereby the practitioner becomes a manifestly complete Buddha (Ray, 2002). Mingyur Rinpoche also says that, to be really effective, yidam practice must be based upon a significant understanding of emptiness. Yidam practice supports the practitioner in achieving the qualities, kāyas and wisdom of the Buddhahood within. Deity practice is a way to acknowledge and remind one of the nature of deity (Schmidt, 2004). Mingyur Rinpoche says that:

> This is how Yidam practice and Guru yoga can actually bestow blessings which bring about, not only the ordinary states of spiritual attainment but also the sublime attainment of enlightenment itself. But if you practice a deity meditation without applying the guru yoga principle, then you merely gain the ordinary benefits of longevity, health, and prosperity. The ultimate attainment of enlightenment through yidam practice is gained only by realizing that the yidam, the guru and one's own mind are in essence indivisible (Schmidt, 2004).

Conclusion

To answer the question of why the status of the deities can be equal to the Triratana is because the status and role of the Tibetan deities are connected to the tulku tradition and also to the Trikāya system. Externally, the deities exist in two classes: the class of enlightened beings such as Buddhas and bodhisattvas and the class of non-enlightened beings. They constitute the Sambhogakāya in the Trikāya system. The deities of both classes are involved with their worshippers socially and spiritually as providers of wealth and security, as teachers, protectors, guardians, advisers and even as a kind of refuge. Internally, the status and roles of the deities are concerned with internal spiritual attainment. They play a significant role in the practice of meditation and in the achievement of the Dharmakāya. In other words, at the beginning of meditation, they are the objects of visualization outside the body. Thereafter, when meditators become one with them, they are the internal Sambhogakāya endowed with all the marks of the Buddha. At this level they constitute a far deeper level of refuge and significantly lead to the realization of the Dharmakāya or emptiness (Collins & Jisum, 2019; Qi, 2021).

References

Allendorf, T. D., Brandt, J. S., & Yang, J. M. (2014). Local perceptions of Tibetan village sacred forests in northwest Yunnan. *Biological Conservation*, *169*, 303-310. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2013.12.001

Austin, J. H. (1999). *Zen and the brain: Toward an understanding of meditation and consciousness*. mit Press.

Baimacuo, G. (2021). The Cham ritual of Padmasambhava in Tibetan Buddhism. *International Journal of Sino-Western Studies*, *20*, 187-202.

Birley, S. (1985). The role of networks in the entrepreneurial process. *Journal of business venturing*, *1*(1), 107-117. https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9026(85)90010-2

Blofeld, J. (1970). *The tantric mysticism of Tibet*. Shambhala.

Brauen, M., & Willson, M. (2000). Deities of Tibetan Buddhism: The Zurich Paintings of the Icons Worthwhile to See.

Bum, T. (2016). The Changing Roles of Tibetan Mountain Deities in the Context of Emerging Environmental Issues: dkar po lha bsham in yul shul. *Asian Highlands Perspectives*, *40*, 1-33.

Chopra, K. L., Major, S., & Pandya, D. K. (1983). Transparent conductors—a status review. *Thin solid films*, *102*(1), 1-46. https://doi.org/10.1016/0040-6090(83)90256-0

Collins, L. ., & Jisum, C. . (2019). The role of linguistics studies on the political debate. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, *3*(1), 48-59. https://doi.org/10.37028/lingcure.v3n1.15

Gadjin, N., & Umeyo, H. (1973). On the Theory of Buddha-Body (Buddha-kāya). *The Eastern Buddhist*, *6*(1), 25-53.

Hajicek-Dobberstein, S. (1995). Soma siddhas and alchemical enlightenment: psychedelic mushrooms in Buddhist tradition. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, *48*(2), 99-118. https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-8741(95)01292-L

Hayashi, S. (1983). The Chinese Controversial Views on the Theory of trikaya. *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies (Indogaku Bukkyogaku Kenkyu)*, *32*(1), 265-267.

Jennings, B. (2010). Enlightenment and enchantment: Technology and moral limits. *Technology in Society*, *32*(1), 25-30. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2009.12.005

Johnson, L. L. (1986). Arthroscopic abrasion arthroplasty historical and pathologic perspective: present status. *Arthroscopy: The Journal of Arthroscopic & Related Surgery*, *2*(1), 54-69. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-8063(86)80012-3

Kay, D. (1997). The New Kadampa Tradition and the continuity of Tibetan Buddhism in transition. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *12*(3), 277-293.

Kumar, S. M. (2002). An introduction to Buddhism for the cognitive-behavioral therapist. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, *9*(1), 40-43. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1077-7229(02)80038-4

Kuznetsov, B. I., & Frye, S. (1981). The Highest Deities of the Tibetan Bon Religion. *The Tibet Journal*, *6*(2), 47-52.

Lama, D. (2015). Address to the Parliamentary Earth Summit (Global Forum) of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

(UNCED). *His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama: The Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama), accessed*, *22*.
Lingpa, J., Rinpoche, P., & Mahapandita, G. (2020). *Deity, mantra, and wisdom: development stage meditation in Tibetan Buddhist tantra*. Shambhala Publications.
Lodu, L. (2011). *Bardo teachings: the way of death and rebirth*. Shambhala Publications.
Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (2012). *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living* (Vol. 42). Springer Science & Business Media.
Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R. D. (1956). Oracles and demons of Tibet: the cult and iconography of the Tibetan protective deities.
Pedersen, D., & Baruffati, V. (1989). Healers, deities, saints and doctors: elements for the analysis of medical systems. *Social Science & Medicine*, *29*(4), 487-496. https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(89)90194-9
Powers, J. (2007). Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism.
Qi, M. (2021). The role and status of drama in spiritual and material culture. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, *5*(S2), 487-500. https://doi.org/10.37028/lingcure.v5nS2.1385
Ray, R. A. (1986). Some Aspects of the Tulku Trrdition in Tibet. *The Tibet Journal*, *11*(4), 35-69.
Ray, R. A. (2002). *Indestructible truth: The living spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism*. Shambhala Publications.
Saikawa, M. (1984). On the trikaya Theory of Vasubandhu. *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies (Indogaku Bukkyogaku Kenkyu)*, *32*(2), 929-932.
Schmidt, M. B. (Ed.). (2004). *Dzogchen Essentials: The Path That Clarifies Confusion*. Rangjung Yeshe Publications.
Sexton, D. L., & Bowman-Upton, N. (1990). Female and male entrepreneurs: Psychological characteristics and their role in gender-related discrimination. *Journal of business venturing*, *5*(1), 29-36. https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9026(90)90024-N
Shen, X., Li, S., Chen, N., Li, S., McShea, W. J., & Lu, Z. (2012). Does science replace traditions? Correlates between traditional Tibetan culture and local bird diversity in Southwest China. *Biological Conservation*, *145*(1), 160-170. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2011.10.027
Thera, N. (2004). *Buddhist dictionary: Manual of Buddhist terms and doctrines*. Buddhist Publication Society.
Von Brück, M. (2001). Canonicity and Divine Interference: The Tulkus and the Shugden-Controversy. *Charisma and Canon: Essays on the Religious History of the Indian Subcontinent*, 228-335.
Williams, P. A. (1996). The relation between a prior earnings forecast by management and analyst response to a current management forecast. *Accounting Review*, 103-115.v
Willson, M., & Brauen, M. (2001). Deities of Tibetan Buddhism: The Zurich Paintings of the Icons Worthwhile to See.
Xing, G. (2004). *The Concept of the Buddha: Its evolution from early Buddhism to the trikAya theory*. Routledge.