

The Role and Status of Deities in Tibetan Buddhist Practice

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Abstract

Throughout the history of Tibetan Buddhism, many controversies have occurred according to the different comprehension of Buddha's teachings such as the two truths and the sudden versus gradual path. The issue upon the status and the role of the deity is one of the most interesting issues in the publicity today. This critical problem has occurred when the 14th Dalai Lama denies the *Dorje Shugden* deity¹ propitiation with the reason that this deity is not the refuge. He also uses his religio-political status to ask the *Dorje Shugden* deity worshipers to follow his decision. Consequently, this causes the dissatisfaction for the *Dorje Shugden* deity worshiper communities. As the outsider perspective, for Buddhists, to deny taking refuge in what is not *triratna* should not be the critical problem at all. Throughout the Buddhist doctrine indicates that Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are the highest refuge; while, the some deities historically are often appeared in the sense of followers or some are just phantom or spiritual beings. However, in Tibetan Buddhist context, the many deities are recognized as the refuge. With the long duration of Buddhism in Tibet, the question why the status of the deities becomes equal to the *triratna* is not easy to be anticipated. In order to provide some perspective upon this issue, this paper aims to investigate the role and status of deities in Tibetan Buddhist practice. In so doing, there will be a division of the status and role of deities in two aspects: (1) the external status and roles and (2) the internal status and roles. The external status refers to the natural, social and spiritual status of the deities. The external roles are differentiated according to their different aspects of the status. The internal status refers to the natural status of the deities when they exist in the state of meditative practice, of course, its roles also depends this status and functions.

Keywords: deities, Tibetan Buddhism

External Status and Role

Natural status of the Tibetan deities: In Buddhism, the external natural status and roles of the deities depends on the Buddhist cosmology. In general, the deities can be classified into the various levels such as the six realms of heaven, *rūpabrama*-realms and *arūpabrama*-realms (Nyanatiloka, 1952: 90). However, in Tibetan Buddhism, the deities alternatively are divided into two categories: the supra-mundane deity (*jig rten las 'das pa'i srung ma*) and the worldly or mundane deity (*jig rten pa'i srung ma*). The former refers to the deities who manifestations of enlightened beings and Buddhas. In other word, they are the god and goddess who have passed beyond the six sphere of existence (Wojkowitz, Rene De Nebesky, 1956: 1-2). The latter group refers to the deities who are still residing within the spheres inhabited by animated beings (Kay, D., 1997: 280). They are taking an active part in

¹ Etymologically, the word "deity" derives from the Latin "*dea*", ("goddess"), and "*deus*", ("god"), and other Indo-European roots such as from the Sanskrit "*deva*", ("god"), "*devi*", ("goddess"), "*divya*", ("transcendental", "spiritual"). Related are words for "sky": the Latin "*dies*" ("day") and "*divum*" ("open sky"), and the Sanskrit "*div*," "*diu*" ("sky," "day," "shine"). Also related are "divine" and "divinity," from the Latin "*divinus*," from "*divus*."

the religious life of Tibet. The deities in both levels are also frequently called the 'haughty one' (*dregs pa*) (Wojkowitz, Rene De Nebesky, 1956: 1). Although, there are a countless number of beings above the level of beings with a gross physical body, they are systematized in different classes depending on their spiritual quality. Michael Von Brück says that:

At the highest level, some of them are emanations (*sprul pa*) of the highest aspects of the Buddha: Mahakala (*Nagpo chenpo*, in 75 forms), Yama (*gShin rje*), Shri Devi (*dPaldan lhamo*), Vaishravana (*rNam thos sras*), etc. Some are deities (*lha*) which have a universal appearance and meaning (such as higher *dharmapalas*, Tib.: *chos skyong* or *srung ma*), some are only local ghosts. ... Those lower beings that are ambiguous have been tamed and bound by oaths—they are the lower *dharmapalas*. Generally speaking, all *dharmapalas* are classified into two different groups: those beyond *samsara* and those within *samsara*. The last group again comprises beings in very different situations concerning their level of being. In order to make contact with the human plane, they use human media who fall into trances. However, there is no generally recognized classification and even within one school or tradition there are significant differences and contradictions of interpretation and classification (Brück, Michael von, 2001: Online).

It is noted that the status of deities sometimes is uncertain because it can be evaluated by their worshipers. For example, the *Dorje Shugden* historically was the mundane deity (Brück, Michael von, 2001: Online). He resides in the lower realm. However, later on, his status was evaluated by the 5th Dalai Lama (1617-82 CE) as the Buddha (Kay, D., 1997: 281).

The general roles of Tibetan deities: The roles of the Tibetan deities: both god and goddess are often referred to two key terms. The first one is the protectors of the religious law (Tb. *chos skyong*, Skt. *dharmapāla*, *dvārapāla*). Other one is the guardians of the Buddhist doctrine (Tb. *bstan srung ma*). The latter term is more usage. In this case, sometimes, the deities are very harmful. These deities are recognized as non-Buddhist spirits. Some are bound by an oath. A little is originally recognized as the non-Buddhist deities. Later on, they are subdued and compelled to assume the position of Buddhist dharma protectors. According to their duties that they have to fulfill, the dharma protectors are normally depicted in the fierce aspect, brandishing weapons and crushing the human or supernatural enemies of Buddhism under their feet (Wojkowitz, Rene De Nebesky, 1956: 1). Also, the scopes of their responsibilities are different according to their qualities. Some are the state protectors; for instance, *Pe Har* deity who is a well known ancient god in the mundane level (*jig rten pa'i srung ma*) who occupies a prominent position in the religious systems of all Tibetan Buddhism schools (Wojkowitz, Rene De Nebesky, 1956: 1). Some are the particular Tibetan Buddhist school protector such as *Palden Lhamo* who is the protective goddess of the *dGe lugs* tradition and Tibetan people (Kay, D., 1997: 281). Similarly to *Dorje Shugden* is significant for the *dGe lugs pa* and *Sa skya pa* school. Especially the *dGe lugs pa* school claims that he is the powerful guardian and protector of their doctrine against any detrimental influence that comes from the side of the old *rNying ma pa* school (Wojkowitz, Rene De Nebesky, 1956: 4).

Social status and roles of Tibetan deities: In the Tibetan communities, some deities are recognized as the teacher (*guru*) and adviser. The status and role of the teacher may come from the nexus of the concept of the deity and *tulku* tradition; while, the role of adviser may come from the historical belief. For example, the 14th Dalai Lama refers to his deity adviser *Nechung*, the state Oracle, 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 reasoning. 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 (Brück, Michael von, 2001: Online).

It is noted that historically the *Nechug* deity is non-Buddhist who was bound by the oath of *Guru Padmasambhava* to be the Buddhist dharma protector and later becomes the adviser of all Dalai Lama (Brück, Michael von, 2001: Online). In the case of being the teacher (*guru*) of the deities, the connection of the *Dorje Shugden* deity to the *tulku* concept may be one of the best examples. The *Dorje Shugden* is recognized as the pantheon of the *Tulku Drakpa Gyaltsen* who is the reincarnation of the disciple of the 2nd Dalai Lama, *Panchen Sonam Drakpa* in 1478-1554 (Brück, Michael von, 2001: Online). In the *trikāya* system, without doubt, he is recognized as the *Nirmanakāya* of the Buddha. This *tulku* socially is the teacher or even master. Logically, after death, they must still be respected as the teacher from his disciples. Moreover, the social roles of deities also can be discussed in the sense of social service. For example, some deities are the border guardians (*mtshams (gyi) srung (ma)*). They are believed to be the protectors who usually prevent the hostile foreigners from entering the Forbidden Land. Also some are known as the guardians of the holy places of pilgrimage (*gnas srung*) (Wojkowitz, Rene De Nebesky, 1956: 5). Some are only mountain deities.

Spiritual status and roles of Tibetan deities: The spiritual status of deities is a refuge. The external spiritual status and role of Tibetan is complex because it is also cooperated with the concept of *tulku* connecting to the bodhisattva idea and *trikāya* system. The deities often are asked for life entrustment by the worshipers. The 14th Dalai Lama argues that this is not Buddhist practice but it is Shamanic; however, when the deities are considered as the pantheon (*sambhogakaya*) of the Tulku, who is the one who takes the bodhisattva vow to be reborn in the *samsaric* world in order to save sentient beings (Reginald A. R., 1986: 36-44). *Tulku* is Buddhist monk who is a part of the *triratana* or even is recognized as the *Nirmanakāya* of the Buddha. Therefore, in this sense, the deities may be understood as the refuge. For example, the *Dorje Shugden* is the pantheon of the *Tulku Drakpa Gyaltsen* (Brück, Michael von, 2001: Online). For the *dGe lugs pa* monk, he is considered by some followers to be an emanation of *Manjushri*, the great Buddha of *Vajrayāna*. Therefore, after death, if he is still considered as the same status. This may lead him to be understood as a part of the *triratna*. As the result of this, the deity is a part of *triratna* which is the refuge. As the role of refuge, deities usually are asked for the various benefits. For instance, they are asked for human wealth, food, life, and good fortune and also asked to grant long life and the fulfillment of all desires, particularly in this life, and invoked against bodily and mental sickness (Brück, Michael von, 2001: Online). However, with the variety of interpretation, the spiritual role of particular deities can be criticized in different opinions. For example, Paul Williams (1996: Online) criticizes the *Dorje Shugden* that:

Basically it seems to me that what we are dealing with here is a controversy between Traditionalists and Modernisers. Like all Dharma Protectors Dorje Shugden is a fierce figure who unusually however appears in the form of a Gelugpa monk. He is considered by some of his followers to be an emanation of Manjushri, although others (including I think the New Kadampa Tradition) appear to consider him to be a fully enlightened Buddha of whom Manjushri is himself an emanation. The Dalai Lama, on the other hand, considers Dorje Shugden to be simply a worldly deity—a

figure of great power but no intrinsic spirituality—of doubtful reliability and not a Buddha at all, or even a bodhisattva. Thus as regards the doctrinal dispute, for one side it is a matter of relying on a Buddha, albeit an apparently rather fierce Buddha; for the other if they take refuge in a worldly deity then this is to abandon taking refuge solely in the Buddha and thus to abandon the very definition of being a Buddhist. From such a perspective if one is not careful this could easily degenerate into a Buddhist version of demon-worship.

According to the complexity of the concept regarding to 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 can be classified into the high level being or even part of the Buddhist refuge, and also the minor worldly deity class.

Internal Status and Role

Internal Status and Roles: The internal status and role of deities is the *Sambhogakāya* which is the bodies of individual mine construction. In other word, it calls the ‘*Yidam*’ or tutelary deity (Brück, Michael von, 2001: Online). *Yidams* are the highest beings which are beyond any conceptualization and have the function of personal tutelary deities; they are nothing other than the radiation of universal Buddha consciousness or Buddha nature (Brück, Michael von, 2001: Online). They are also systemized into the supra-mundane class. *Yidam* plays a significant role in the meditative practice. They exist in the levels of meditation and eventually lead to the highest goal of meditative practice which is achievement of the *Dharmakāya* (emptiness). 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 *yidam* alive via daily mantra recitation. One who misses this practice will go to hell. It is not similar to the *Kagyū* and *Nyingma* system, one who practices only one deity, all others are automatically included in that. *Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche* says just as the deity practice, if one realizes one Buddha, one automatically realizes all other Buddhas at the same time (Schmidt, Marcia Binder, 2004: 126). *Lama Putse* and *Pema Thasi* say that the deity meditation corresponds to the three Tibetan meditations: meditation of suchness, meditation of illumination and meditation of the seed syllable. The outcome of these meditations connects to the realization of the three bodies. The suchness meditation leads to the *dharmakāya* realization. In the illumination meditation, one realizes the *sambhogakāya* endowed with all major and minor marks of the Buddha. The meditation of the seed syllable leads to the *nirmanakāya* realization. In all meditation, deity plays an important role. For example, the first one, deity is used as the object of visualization. The second one, practitioner experiences the compassion as well as the deities as the body of the Buddha which is also called the ‘magical meditation’. The last one, the seed syllable is the source of entire *mandala* of deities (Schmidt, Marcia Binder, 2004: 158-163).

One example *tantra* practice that leads to the *dharmakāya* realization is the nine *yāna* practice of *Nyingma* tradition.² Reginald A. Ray explains the role of deity in the outer *yānas* that in the fourth *yāna*, *Kriyayoga-yāna* which is the purification of the practitioners’ body, speech and mind. In this level, the deity is master and the practitioner is servant. The deity is visualized as exterior to oneself and also it is worshipped. In the fifth *yāna*, *Upayoga-yāna*, the

² The *Dzogchen* teachings are the highest of the nine *yāna*, (Tibetan *theg pa*, vehicle) of the *Nyingma* school of Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan Bön (*bon*) tradition. Many lamas, particularly of the *Nyingma* and *Kagyū* schools, regard them as the most profound teachings altogether.

deity is still external, but more nearly on a level with the practitioner, as friend or helper. In sixth *yāna*, *yoga-yāna*, in the absolute truth level, all phenomena are free of concept, empty and luminous. In the relative truth, all phenomena are the *mandala* of deities. In this *yāna*, one visualizes oneself as the deity. Deity is seen in conventional way without consorts and non-wrathful. Rituals are performed as offering to the deity. Moreover, he explains their role in the inner *yānas* that in this *yāna*, when the two truths are inseparable. All phenomena are equal. In the seventh *yāna*, *Mahāyoga-yāna* (masculine principle), within the absolute truth all things are accepted as the essence of the mind and the *Dharmakāya*. All manifestation, thoughts and appearances are considered to be the sacred aspects of the divinities within relative truth. This *yāna* emphasizes on the visualization of oneself as the deity with women consort. All phenomena are seen as the essence of the deities. However, in the eighth *yāna*, *Anuyoga-yāna* (feminine principle), the deity visualization is not so much emphasized. In the ninth *yāna*, *Atiyoga-yāna* (nonduality of masculine and feminine principle), all existents are the same and they are pure in the *Dharmakāya* (Ray, R. A., 2001: 120-127).

Other example, the *tantra* practice leading to the *sambhogakāya* realization is called the generation of self into deity in the *Kriyā Tantra* of the *Mādhyamika*. This practice leads to be the fully Buddha. *Mkhas Grub Rje* explains that the two realities: the Self Reality (*ātma-tattva*), the God Reality (*devatā-tattva*) of the practitioner will generate the six gods or deities: 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*). These deities are equivalent to the generation by means of the five *Abhisamdodhi* in the higher Tantra (Rje, Mkhas Grup, 1968: 159-63). This leads to the attainment of the *Mahāvairocana*, the *sambhoga-kāya*, adorned with the thirty-two characteristics and the eighty minor marks. Thereby the practitioner became a manifest complete Buddha (Rje, Mkhas Grup, 1968: 29-35). *Mingyur Rinpoche* also says to be really effective; *yidam* practice must be based upon a significant understanding of emptiness. *Yidam* practice supports practitioner to achieve the qualities, *kāyas* and wisdom of the Buddhahood within. It also lead to attain the *dharmakāya* of all Buddhas. The deity practice is a way to acknowledge and remind the nature of deity (Schmidt, Marcia Binder, 2004: 139-141). To gain the best benefits from the deity meditational practice, *Mingyur Rinpoche* suggests the application of *Yidam* practice and *Guru yoga* that:

According to *Vajrayāna* teaching, that is how the *yidam* 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, Marcia Binder, 2004: 139-140).

Conclusion

To answer the question why the status of the deities becomes equal to the *triratna* can be different because the status and the role of the Tibetan deities are connected to the *tulku* tradition and also the *trikāya* system. Externally, the status and roles of deities exist in two classes: enlightened beings such as Buddha or bodhisattva and non-enlightened being. They are *sambhogakāya* in the *trikāya* system. The deities in both classes involve their worshipers socially and spiritually in the sense of security and wealth providers, teacher, protector, guardian, adviser or even the refuge. Internally, the status and roles of deities concerns the internal spiritual attainment. They play a significant role to achieve the *dharmakāya*. In other word, 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 all marks of the Buddha. They significantly lead to the realization of the *dharmakāya* or emptiness.

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