

How does geoffrey
sammuels portray
tibetan buddhism



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There are always two halves to a whole and for Samuel this holds the key to his fresh approach to Tibetan Buddhism. Dividing the subject into two concepts with each representing a polarity of a shared whole (that being the attainment of ultimate Enlightenment), and classified as that of Clerical Buddhism and Shamanic Buddhism.

Recognising the other conceptual tools available, that of the Sutra , Tantra, Theravada, Mahayana, or the Tibetan indigenous religion of Bon as exhausted, 1 Samuel gives his full attention from a uniquely different however also necessary and powerful perspective. For Samuels, Clerical Buddhism represented a state, karma operated function of which he informs us that " It dismisses activity within the cycle of rebirth as irrelevant, however, with the exception of the acquisition of merit through virtuous action, and the avoidance of nonvirtuous action.

Its primary mode of activity is scholarship, philosophical analysis and monastic discipline. Its typical figure is the scholar monk studying texts or engaged in philosophical debate. Its textual base is made up of the Vinaya or monastic disciplinary code, the Sutras of the Hinayana and Mahayana, and the writings of Indian Buddhist Philosophers and their Tibetan followers. " 2

Gelners' evaluation, was that for Samuels, Clerical Buddhism " emphasizes control, rationality, book-learning, hierarchy, morality and the gradual path of the Manyana" 3 This being, in contrast to that of Shamanic Buddhism, " which rejects all of these and makes use of altered states of consciousness which are available to the many which are without the mediation of a clerical

hierarchy and without long monastic training, in the name of instant, or at least more immediate, enlightenment.

Samuels identifies that Shamanic Buddhism although as sharing some aspects of Tibetan Folk Ritual should be distinguished as distinct and separate. Samuels furthers that his " contention(which is not particularly original) is that certain aspects of Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism as practised in Tibet may be described as Shamanic, in that they are centered around communication with an alternate mode of reality (that of the Tantric deities) via the alternate states of consciousness of Tantric yoga.

I shall argue that this communication forms the basis for much of the Tibetan lama's role in relation to Tibetan society. " 5 Having presented the two opposing paths, Samuels intent is to show us how they are fundamentally inseparable, not only sharing the same goal from beginning to end, but also both distinctive paths in part of a pneumatically interwoven cosmogony, philosophy, esoteric science, teaching and religion.

This he argues from both an anthropological and an historical avenue. Samuels admits that this is a complex problem, as elements of Shamanic Buddhism can be found in Clerical Buddhism and vice-versa. Further to this lama scholarship has developed alternative ways of reconciling the two modalities. 6 With all Shamanic emphasis being directed to Vajrayana Buddhism, it is here that Samuels rests his laurels.

Arguing that the first arrival of Buddhism in the 9th Century, up to and including the 13th Century was initially dependant on lay patronage, villagers, and local chieftains, Buddhism had arrived as a set of techniques, <https://assignbuster.com/how-does-geoffrey-sammuels-portray-tibetan-buddhism/>

which were adopted by indigenous shamanic practitioners. Samuels denotes that " the antecedents of Tibetan ritual practise of all kinds lay primarily in India, specifically in the tantric Buddhism of the siddhas," 7. These techniques had originated in India and had been brought to Tibet by both Indian and Tibetan teachers who had crossed the Himalayas.

The fact that same basic structure of tantric rituals are found in the Sanskrit texts, their Tibetan translations, the tantric practises of Japan , Bali and newer population of the Kathmandu valley leave no doubt in Samuels' mind, and his conclusion that their origin is truly Indian. 8 It is this period that the establishment of Vajrayana Buddhism occurred, prior to that of clerical Buddhism arriving much later.. John powers credits the first transmission of Tibetan Buddhism to be during the period of Songtsen Gampo (ca. 18-650), the first during a period of three " Religious Kings" and an incarnation of Avalokitesvara.

Through Gampo's marriages Tibet was introduced to both Chinese and Indian Buddhism. Both wives were believed to be incarnations of the Buddha Tara. The Chinese Ch'an school taught that Enlightenment is gained suddenly while the Indian School that it was a gradual occurrence⁹, an argument he substantiates from a line through Pudon.. 10 . Gethin summarises the situation as a " simplification of a complex history, and we can assume some influence of Chinese Buddhism on Tibetan Buddhism" 11.

Gethin also attributes the activity of the yogin Atisa (982-1054) to the founding of the Monastery 'Brom-ston in 1057 and the establishment of the bKa' gdams-pa school. This all set the course for Buddhist monasticism in

Tibet and was the seed to the formation of the Kanjur some three centuries later. 12 Scholars hold unanimity, in that, what constitutes as Tibetan Buddhism having arrived in Tibet in three waves, and involved teachings of both a sudden pathway to Enlightenment and a gradual pathway to Enlightenment.

It is in this sudden pathway that Samuels terms " Shamanic or Tantric(Vajrayana) Buddhism" 13, furthering that it " is oral, and it derives from a lineage of teachings that can be viewed as having originated in a 'primal time' or 'Great Time' of myth. " 14 Samuels defines Shamanism as " the regulation and transformation of human life and human society through the use (or purported use) of alternate states of consciousness by means of which specialist practitioners are held to communicate with a mode of reality alternative to, and more fundamental than, the world of everyday experience" 15.

Outlining the central feature of Vajrayana practise to be the adoption of the identity of a Tantric deity or alternatively an active and conscious assumption of divine identity Samuels steers us away from this being a simple state of possession by an external God, and explains the deity as both internal and external. 6 For Samuels " It is a potentiality within both the individual human being and within the universe as a whole, and the point of the operation could perhaps be described as the practitioner tuning into an underlying modality of the universe and so overcoming the illusory duality between individual human being and the universe as a whole. " 17 This all achieved by the process of Tantric Yoga where the practitioners take on the

identity of deities on route to Buddha hood, and thus the powers of the deity are available to them.

It is this which acts as the basis of the relative siddhas, including healing, long life, divination and the destruction of hostile forces and is also the ritual foundation of the ritual practise of the lamas. These deities are also encountered in personified form in Dreams and visions by lamas who can return from them with new teachings, rituals and practises for the followers.

Samuels sums up his position in that " all tantric lamas, whether reincarnate or not, engage in practises in the course of which they are held to transform into deities, to carry out various operations within the define world which are held to have real consequences within our everyday world" 18 and finds it something very similar in idiom and in social function to shamanism of the Central Asian-Siberian variety. 19 | It is clear that these deities hold a significant place in both the Clerical and Shamanic Buddhism, historically, methodologically and practically.

Samuels uses the yogi Padmasambhava as an example, that being " as an archetype, a wandering yogin who is only secondarily a great scholar capable of beating the wisest of pandits" 20. It is here we find a correlation to the work of Carl Jung, in his terminology of archetypes in his dream works.. Jung identified these archetypes as religious and symbolic in essence, arriving from the unconscious element of a collective mind. He did not however associate them to be used in a form of meditation but saw them as a fundamental tool in his dream analysis.

This is on the contrary to a central role of the Hebrew Kabbalists practise, that being meditations on a revealed set of archetypes which exist in four Kabbalaistic worlds. It is in this context to note that the first triad of this pathway consists of God holding the top point of the triangle with understanding below to its left and wisdom below to its right, each one represented as an archetype. 22 This is not several hundred miles away from the Tibetan Buddhist archetypal triad of the flower in the lotus, compassion and wisdom.

Many more similarities of this practise can be found in transcendental magic as revealed by Elaphias Levi including divination, practical magic and the symbolic Tarot cards. 23 It is on this level that Samuels provides a large slice of his evidence in that by identifying the practise of Vajrayana Buddhism, existing as a form of Buddhism of India as shamanic in nature, which was passed to Tibet prior to that of the scholarly Clerical Buddhism. This initially occurred by the teachings of wandering Buddhist Yogi practising Vajrayana Buddhism.

This practise was allowed to flourish as Tibet was not clerically controlled. In comparison to its Buddhist neighbours, where although the Vajrayana was acknowledged and practised by all Buddhist schools it was generally kept to a peripheral, and a select few and out of the lime light. It is also clear that for some that the practise was not looked upon with appreciating eyes, for many it was part of a progression but only after the accomplishment of all the practises of a bodhisattva and practise of the ten paramita as we find in The Decree of Yeshe Od, 24 This in itself portrays the two forms of Buddhism in an inseparable capacity in that they are part of the same concept.
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It is with the deities, the archetypes that Samuels finds another synthesis, for these are not only embedded in Tibetan myth and legend but also play the central role in the practice of Shamanic Buddhism and the beliefs and history of the Clerical Buddhists. An example of this we find in the story of Avalokitesvara early incarnations as a monkey when Tibet first appeared from the waters. The monkey mated with an ogress out of compassion only later to incarnate as King Songtsen Gampo.

Samuel States " If we regard Avalokitesvara not as a deity but as a mode of feeling, cognition, and behaviour, then to say that Avalokitesvara is present whenever his practice is done is not some kind of a poetic statement but a simple description. " 25 This represents a major theme for Samuels, in that through out Tibetan Buddhism we find numerous examples of incarnations and it is here that the underlying symbolism and the use of Avalokitesvara as a tantric tool on the path to Enlightenment all portray a picture which reveals again an inseparable concept.

Samuels also addresses the issue of Modern Tibetan Buddhism which has been defined by two synthesis, the Geluk and the Ri Me. These represent two models of understanding and approaches to the Vajrayana. The Geluk is a monastic and scholarly approach of 'virtuous order', of the Kadam lineage founded by a Kadam monk, Tsongkhapa (1357-1419). At the age of thirty-three Tsongkhapa left the monastery for the cave to practise the Vajrayana ultimately in the attainment of realisation. The Ri Me synthesis developed during the nineteenth century and represented the ancient ideals of yogic practise.

It believes the root of Buddhism lies in the Vajrayana. It is a non-sectarian order and models a householder-yogin approach of Indian tantric tradition held by the Nyingma and Kagyu approaches, at the same time incorporating within it both scholarly and monastic trends. 26 Ray summarises his appraisal of the situation and states " the Vajrayana has continued to be considered the ultimate teaching of the Buddha and has acted as the basic inspiration of Tibetan Buddhism as a whole" 27.

This again for Samuels shows an interweaving of Shamanic and Clerical orientations; 28 however he is also very aware that the two aspects have different orientations towards the world and towards human experience and behaviour. 29 He states " Cross- culturally, one or the other orientation predominates in most human societies or social groups. By and large, small scale preliterate societies had and have a dominantly shamanic orientation, while pre-modern states with developed literacy and centralised bureaucratic government have been predominately clerical with shamanic elements present in subordinate contexts.

Tibetan societies are unusual in that the shamanic complex has a strong and autonomous role within what is undoubtedly a literate and sophisticated culture. " 30 It is a cumulative argument that Samuels has presented us, one that gives us a different approach in understanding the complex diversity of Tibetan Buddhism however it is in this approach that we can understand the subject from a new perspective, that being Shamanic Buddhism and Clerical Buddhism as polarities of one force (Tibetan Buddhism).

How these can be viewed as different yet both belong to the same, and in how they work in harmony with each other to show an equilibrium of balance. It may be worthy of research to compare the form, structure and elements within Shamanic Buddhism with that of Western esoteric thought. We do find as mentioned similarity between Shamanic Buddhism and the Hebrew esoteric doctrines of the Kabbalah, 31 and the works of Carl Jung. 32 Blavatsky also adds fuel to this fire in her unveiling of the mysteries of the hebdomad.

It is here we find the human principles compared with the principles of human nature as being identical in the systems of the Kabbalah and the systems of Shamanic Buddhism. 33 We also find analogy in the magical world of Eliphas Levi³⁴. Samuels has presented his case well and from both an anthropological and historical perspective, it is fully appreciated that his work is of much interest and value in any future study of Tibetan Buddhism as a whole or as two halves.