

## DISCUSSION FORUM

Response to Prof. S.K. Ramachandra Rao.

(Rf. "CHos: The Unique Dharma of Tibet,"  
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Professor S.K. Ramachandra Rao's thesis ("Chos: The Unique Dharma of Tibet," Bangalore: JOURNAL OF DHARMA, Vol. I, Nos. 1 & 2, July, 1975, pp. 137-151) is that the Buddhism of Tibet, or *chos*. in Tibetan, is not really Buddhism at all but a shamanism with Buddhist trappings. Our critique of his article shall be twofold: In the first place, we should like to ask Professor Rao what is this thing he calls "Buddhism" which *chos*. is not; in the second place, we shall point out some historical inconsistencies and misrepresentations and call into question some dubious etymologies and renderings from the Tibetan.

In following Professor Rao's arguments, we are left at a loss as to just what he means by "Buddhism." Without offering a definition of what Buddhism is, his claim—that *chos*. is not Buddhism—is superficial and prejudicial. The methodology of our critique shall be to elicit from Professor Rao's article some definitions for "Buddhism" and to show that his claims about *chos*. are unjustified in terms of these definitions.

One definition we can infer from Professor Rao's article is that Buddhism means certain philosophic systems. He argues on page 144 that because Santiraksita's Buddhism was unacceptable to the Tibetan mentality, Padmasambhāva (Gu.ru. Rin.po.che.) was invited to Tibet to spread a popularistic admixture of indigenous shamanism and Indian Buddhism. If we are to believe Professor Rao, Santiraksita's philosophical Buddhism made no further inroads into Tibet, and that his mission at best merely allowed Padmasambhāva's shamanism to take root in Tibetan soil. However Rao must be aware that it was Santiraksita's pupil, Kamalasila, who established the Svātantrika norm for early Tibetan Buddhism by defeating his Chinese opponent at bSam.yas. in

794. Thus the rNying.ma.pa. lineage, which Rao so disparages as shamanistic, was firmly rooted in both the experiential teachings of Tantrika Padmasambhāva and philosophical teachings of Santiraksita and Kamalasila.

Obviously Professor Rao is not comfortable with Tantric texts. He exhibits his lack of sympathy for Tantra (*rgyud*) in his discussion of the mission of Padmasambhāva. He reads the *rnam.thar.* (hagiography) of Padmasambhāva quite literally, entirely missing the meanings of this text. It is not our intention to enter into the complex issues relating to Tantric hermeneutics in this essay; however, let Professor Rao be cautioned by the nineteenth century Tibetan ecumenicist, bLa.ma. Mi.pham., who says that those who take Tantric texts too literally end up merely with too many children!\* We would offer that one does not get a picture of the mission of Padmasambhāva from his *rnam.thar.*, as Rao seems to expect; rather, one gets a psychohistory of sorts, the story of the spiritual growth, in symbolic terms, of a great *ācārya-tantrika*.

Professor Rao concludes his discussion of Padmasambhāva with the outlandish claim that the Vajrayāna is not Buddhism. But a creation of Padmasambhāva, an amalgm of *bon. po.* shamanism and a few Buddhist terms. It is rather elementary that the Vajrayāna developed in India and not in Tibet, at a time when Buddhism was all but unknown north of the Himalayas. Rao here implies that by "Buddhism" he means that which is Indian. Since, following Rao, the Vajrayāna was synthesized in Tibet, therefore it is not Buddhism. This line of reasoning is seen as faulty by means of most elementary considerations of Buddhist history: that the Vajrayāna was a product of Indian, not Tibetan, soil.

Professor Rao's case weakens further when he dabbles with Tibetan etymologies. He contends that *chos*. is an ambiguous term which refers to religion generally, and as such does not differentiate Buddhism from shamanism. However like all words, *chos*. has a history. It is true that it is the Tibetan equivalent of the Sanskrit *dharma*, a term with an astonishingly wide range of usages. This does not imply that *chos*., as used by Tibetans to refer to their religion, is an ambiguous term. The term is a shortened form of the original *sangs.rgyas.kyi.chos.*, a translation of *Buddhadharma* (*Sangs.rgyas.=Buddha*). After *Buddhadharma* had achieved supremacy over the indigenous *bon.po.*, the usage of the term

\* — from a conversation with Professor H. V. Guenther,

was shortened to *chos.*, simply because it was no longer necessary to use the more polemical and lengthy form. But the meaning of *chos.* (except in a technical sense, when it can mean "factors of experience" or the like) remained equivalent to *sangs.rgyas.kyi.chos.* The Tibetans have always been precise in this matter: they had even distinguished pre-Buddhistic religion by *mi.chos.* ("religion of men") to refer to higher forms of *bon.* Even the presupposition that *bon.* may so easily be equated with shamanism must be put into question in the light of this Tibetan distinction.

Rao's presuppositions about *bon.* manifest in his dubious etymology for *gShen.rabs.*, the founder of *bon.* On page 140 he claims that *gShen.rabs.* means "great shaman." The verb *gshen.* means "to remember" and *rabs.* is a suffix which denotes intensification. *gShen.rabs.* would derive from something like "intensification of memory," implying an intellectual-spiritual accomplishment and not necessarily a shaman.

Professor Rao also claims that the words *bon.* and *bod.* (Tibet) have a common etymology, a verb meaning "to mutter incantations." He nowhere supports this claim, however, and we find little reason to accept it. "To express or mutter" is one meaning of *bon.ba.*, granted, but there is no support for Rao's claiming its common etymology with *bod.*

Rao also gives no evidence for his claim that "...at least two thirds of the population of Tibet are 'Believers in Bon', despite the religious and political ascendancy of *chos.*" This claim is in opposition to all population surveys of Tibet, whether from Tibetan, Chinese, or British sources, and one wonders just how Rao went about arriving at this figure.

Professor Rao offers as evidence for his claim that the *gtor.ma.* offering-cake, often seen in Tibetan temples, are symbolic representations of the old *bon.po.* sacrificial rites. He bases this claim on an etymology of *gtor.ma.* which he claims means "to rend or tear up" (page 146). This word most often means "to offer up" rather than "to tear up", although the latter is a relatively rare usage. Similar offering-cakes may be seen in numerous Hindu and Buddhist temples in India and elsewhere, so Rao's attribution of this phenomenon to *bon.po.* shamanism is, at best, questionable.

Rao also evidences his claim by stating that the prayer wheel (*ma.ni.chos.* 'khor.), so prevalent in Tibet, is a vestige of *bon.po.* nomadic motion symbolism. The Tibetans do indeed use symbolism of motion for religious meanings, as with *mkha'.* 'gro.ma.

(*dakini*) symbolism. *mkha'.*'gro.ma. means "she who moves about in space, or *ākāśa*", and is used to represent inspirational faculties of mind. This symbolism, however, is directly borrowed from India. The prayer wheel, however, is an entirely different matter. Rather than symbolizing motion, it symbolizes the turning of the Wheel of Dharma by Lord Buddha at Sarnath. Wheel symbolism is very important for Tibetan Buddhism, but one can by no means reasonably attribute it to nomadic wanderings. Rather it is a borrowing from India, where the wheel becomes symbolic of birth and death (*bhavacakra*, *srid.pa'i.* 'khor.lo) or the turning of the Wheel of Dharma (*dharmacakrapravāna*, *chos.* 'khor. *bskor*).

There are other specific problems with Rao's position, such as his search for "meaning" of *mantra* (page 150). However we feel we may leave specific objections and return to the questions of Rao's implied acceptance of such a thing as normative Buddhism, or of normative religion generally. Has Buddhism a "central conception"? Can we content ourselves with saying, as would scholars with a methodology borrowed from the social sciences, that Buddhism is whatever people who call themselves Buddhists do? Can Buddhism be characterized simply as *anatmavada*, as does Professor Murti? Or is it a "direct transmission outside of scripture," as Zen would tell us? Or are all or these definitions like so many blind men grasping at different parts of an elephant, making pompous claims such as "this is tree" and "this is stone"? Perhaps the search for a normative Buddhism is itself a meaningless endeavour.

If one were able to make judgments about differences in religions, at what level would it be? India has long been able to distinguish three levels: the ethical, the religious, and the spiritual. As for the latter, as Nāgārjuna has demonstrated for Buddhists, we mean religious actions: rituals, duties, liturgies, etc., which would appear to be more in the scope of those who adopt anthropological and sociological approaches to religion. As for the religious dimension, we mean how these rituals, etc., are conceptualized by members of the religion. This is the realm of the reflective practitioner, the realm of philosophy, of ideas. It is here that religions may fruitfully dialogue, for here difference remains a possibility (in contradistinction to the spiritual dimension, in which the category of the difference, like all categories and speech, is superimposition), yet the scholar is not reduced to a mere chronicler. Rao has failed to inform his readers as to the level at which he is speaking. He implies a conceptual level; that is to say, he would like the reader to believe that shamanism is conceptually different

from Buddhism (a point we would not dispute). But he fails to define his terms, to give some conceptual meaning to "shamanism" and "Buddhism." His approach is then that of the social scientist, using faulty demographic, historical, and etymological devices. By shifting fields, Rao's claim collapses.

One might hope that such questions as Rao's could be addressed dialogically, i.e., conceptually. What Buddhism is could perhaps be indicated in this matter, and not by mere arbitrariness. Professor Rao's polemic, then, is extremely monological, and poorly conceived and executed.

### Reply to Prof. Nathan Katz

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I appreciate the response of Prof. Nathan Katz to my paper on CHos. I am grateful to him for the care with which he has read my paper and for the courtesy with which he has listed points for clarification. Before I deal with the points he has raised, I should perhaps make a few general observations. The paper which appeared in this Journal is an abstract of the second chapter of my forthcoming book *The Tibetan Tantrik Tradition* (now in the press). My source-materials, working propositions, and practical orientations occur elsewhere in the book. Secondly, Katz is mistaken when he thinks that I am prejudiced against 'Tantrik Buddhism'. On the contrary, I am an 'inside-man' so far as the Tantra is concerned: I have a Tantrik initiation myself, and I am committed deeply to one of the Tibetan traditions. About my outlook on the Tantra, I refer Katz to my *Origins of Indian Thought* (Bangalore University, 1973), where I have tried to show that even the so called Vedic tradition is built on a Tantrik framework. Thirdly, when I described *Bon* or *rNying-ma* as "shamanistic", the expression is by no means disparaging. No Indian or Tibetan will take offence when his religion is described as containing shamanistic elements. Any religion of Indian origin necessarily works with shamanistic constructs in its early phase.

Prof. Nathan Katz asks me what I mean by Buddhism. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism has a definite connotation to the Indian mind. Allegiance to, and adoration of, the Buddha (the historical Sakyamuni) is a minor detail; the four 'noble truths' and 'eightfold path' are not peculiar to this religion; they are acceptable to all the systems in India. The concepts of egolessness and the doctrine of Void are what distinguish Buddhism in Indian tradition. And these are what are common to all the eighteen schools of Buddhism and to all the forms it assumed here and

elsewhere. The most significant differentia of Mahāyāna Buddhism is the idea of **Bodhisattva**—vow and the concept of **bodhicitta** it involves. Until these ideas developed, Buddhism was more of a philosophical discipline than a religious system. This is why Asokan edicts do not specify the Buddhist religion, nor does Asoka characterise himself as a Buddhist. It is only when the philosophical presuppositions of Buddhism became obsolete or assimilated in a more comprehensive discipline that Buddhism lost its stronghold in India; it ceased to function as a distinct phenomenon. The practices founded upon egolessness. Void and the **Bhodhisattva** ideal constituted the core of Buddhist religion as it spread outside India. This is what I mean by Buddhism.

Prof. Katz feels that I should have informed the readers whether I was speaking at the ethical, religious or spiritual level of Buddhism. He also mentions that India has long been able to distinguish these levels. If it has, I do not know. My own view is that India never made this distinction; in fact, Indian thought resists such compartmentalization. The suggestion of Katz that religious actions (like rituals) and their conceptualizations can be separated is amusing! What are the evidences Katz has gathered for such distinction being made in India? In any case I wonder what purpose this will serve!

It is not without thought that I have distinguished Buddhism from CHos. Anyone who has read books in English on Tibetan religion learns that CHos is Buddhism, simply because CHos is to be marked off **Bon**. This is an unwarranted simplification. Actually, **Bon** and CHos are not (and have not been) irreconcilable opposites; they have fruitfully interacted. The temperament of religions of Indian origin is assimilative, accommodative and integrative. The Buddhists who went to Tibet did not look upon **Bon** as an antagonistic creed and did not attempt to supplant it. It is true that in Tibet there was a rivalry between **Bon** and Buddhism, and there were spells of persecution. But this was essentially political in context, and does not reflect popular sentiments in the matter. The Indian pandits who brought Buddhism into Tibet knew that the Indian variety would not suit Tibetans, and concentrated on adapting it to the new needs. The great work of Padmasambhava is to be considered in this light. The works that Atisha wrote in India and the manuals that he prepared in Tibet are not identical in approach or emphasis. The Indian Tibetologists like S.G. Das, Vidyabhushana, Rahul Sankrityayana, and Vidhusekhara Bhattacharyya have pointed out that when Indian

pandits from Nālanda and Vikramasila rendered the Mahāyāna works in Sanskrit to Tibetan, they had to introduce characteristic changes in the texts; when these changes are examined, the attitudinal shift becomes evident. Thus the Buddhism that developed in Tibet became in every sense of the term Tibetan Buddhism. And there was nothing unnatural or irreverent in this. In the emergence of the new religion, the older **Bon** necessarily played its part. It is in this sense that I have distinguished Buddhism (of the Indian variety) from CHos.

I do not agree with Katz that CHos is merely the shortened form of **Sangs-rGyas Kyi CHos**, which, according to him, is a translation of **Buddhadharma**. While I am aware that this expression has been frequently employed, I do not see how one can infer that CHos is an abbreviation. In expressions like **CHos Kyi Mi** ("religion, its man"), **CHos Las** ("religious work") and so on, there is no suggestion of abbreviation. Katz may be aware that the **Indian Dharma** (which he admits is what CHos means) is by no means the shortened form of **Buddhadharma**, or of any other composite dharma. The expression can occur independently because it has a self contained, complete and significant meaning both linguistically and traditionally fixed. **Buddhadharma** is but a variety of Dharma which is more fundamental than the former. The Tibetan CHos is meant to be an exact equivalent of the Indian Dharma. There is no reason why its meaning should be more limited than its Indian model. Katz himself mentions the pre-Buddhist **Mā-CHos** and **IHa-CHos**, which are **Bon** phases. Does he hold that CHos here means **Buddhadharma**? Even as Dharma is peculiar to India, CHos is peculiar to Tibet. That Buddhist details prevailed there exclusively is a historical accident which contributed to the incorrect identification of CHos with Buddhism.

Katz refers to the Indian origin of Vajrayāna, but ignores the fact that Tibetan scholars who came in large numbers to the Nālanda, Vikramasila, Somapuri and Jagaddala monastic colleges contributed to the development of Vajrayāna. The Indian centres of the Vajrayāna and the age of its emergence strongly suggest Tibetan influence. Some of the *sadhanas* actually mention 'Bhotesu uddhritam'. The active cooperation of Tibetans and Indians in religious matters commenced in India but matured in Tibet. The *siddhas*, who figure prominently in Vajrayāna, in **Natha-sampradaya**, in **Saiva-siddhaata** and **Rasa-darshana** represent the Tibeto-Indian team that crystallised the creed that Tibet ultimately accepted.

I do not see the relevance of Katz referring to the Samye debate between Kamalasila and Hoshang, while arguing that Buddhist influences continued in Tibet after Santarakshita. I did not dispute this fact. What I said was that the quietist way of Sāntarakshita did not succeed in Tibet as the fiery way of Padmasambhava did. Tibetan historical sources suggest that Sāntarakshita's influence waned. The victor Samye debate, Kamalasila, was a disciple of Sāntarakshita; but Katz does not seem to know that soon after the debate Kamalasila was assassinated and religion on Tibet entered a dark phase until Atisha arrived in Tibet. What are the evidences for Katz to suppose that the philosophical teachings of Sāntarakshita and Kamalasila are basic to the *nying-ma-pa*? It is common knowledge that this particular tradition rallied round Padmasambhava alone.

Further, regarding the Tāntrik hagiography of Padmasambhava Katz takes objection to my reading the texts literally in order to understand the great teacher's mission. His objection does not make sense to me. I have not belittled Padmasambhava's importance; I have called him a genius of synthesis, and have described him as one of the architects of Vajrayāna. The fantastic accounts in Tibetan of his exploits, which I have not relied upon, are described by Katz as "a psychohistory of sorts." I do not know what he means by this expression; but I may mention that India also has a rich literature of this type but no one takes it seriously. We do not regard its contents as "stories of spiritual growth, in symbolic terms" as Katz would want us to do. We do not mistake fairy-tales for philosophical treatises; and we make a distinction between Tantrik symbolism and Tantrik excesses. I suppose Tibetans also do the same.

Regarding my view that *Bon* made a big impact on the type of Buddhism that flourished in Tibet, Katz appears to be exercised considerably. He questions my common etymology of *Bon* and *Bot*. He has failed to note that I have said: "It has been suggested that the word *Bon*..." (p. 137); it is not my idea. The suggestion came from the eminent Tibetologist, Rahul Samkrityayana; and was accepted by another Tibetologist of equal eminence, Vidhusekhara Bhattacharya. But that is a small matter. More significant is Katz disputing my claim that a majority of Tibetans are *Bon*-believers. I have not visited Tibet myself, but this is what I find in the accounts of most of the scholarly travellers; the 'two-thirds' figure is to be found in the paper on *Bon* written by S.C. Das (J.B.I.). But does Katz seriously believe that all the

rituals and ceremonials characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism were directly derived from the earliest phase of Indian Buddhism? The Tāntrik details in Tibetan practice do not all of them have Indian counterparts; some of them are quite peculiar to Tibet. Where did they come from? Is it unreasonable to trace their source in *Bon*? And any student of culture will easily recognise that what is indigenous to a country will survive against all odds in one form or another, and will make an impact upon whatever grows on the soil in time. The great interest in Tibetan Buddhism lies in this very detail: it was a special contribution of the Tibetan genius, and not a mere carry-over from the Indian context.

Adverting to this criticism of Katz, there are two other points that need to be cleared. Katz considers my translation of *gTor-ma* as 'a relatively rare usage'. Is it merely 'offering'? Tibetan has another word for it: *mChod* as in *mChod-rTen* ("offering base"). I fail to understand how *gTor* can mean anything other than 'breaking up', or 'tearing' or 'cutting up'. And the cake that is offered in Tibet is 'broken up'. The Indian equivalent for it is 'bali' which also has the same significance. Both the Indian 'bali' and the Tibetan *gTorma* originated in animal sacrifices which had shamanistic involvements. And even now in India when a coconut is offered to the deity it is broken and offered. Sometimes the offering is painted red, as in Tibet, and the natural supposition is that it is a telltale survival of a one-time blood employment. Katz seems to be needlessly sensitive to any mention of *Bon* background of Tibetan religion.

The other point is the explanation of Katz that the prayer wheel—which itself incidentally is a wrong expression—symbolises the Buddha's turning of the Dharma-wheel at Sāranath; and that it was borrowed from India. Why then is it altogether absent in India? It was, in fact, never current in India. Indian art and architecture contain no clue whatever to the presence of this custom; literary references are not there at all. And the other countries that borrowed Buddhism from India did not develop this custom. India is no doubt acquainted with the wheel-symbolism: *bhavacakra*, *karmacakra*, *bhagyacakra*, *mandalacakra*, *dharmacakra* and so on. But the prayer-wheel was never invented here. I fail to be convinced that the prayer-wheel originated with the Buddha's *dharmacakrapravartana*; it may have been the meaning projected on an older custom.

Finally, Katz concludes by criticizing me for the implied

acceptance of 'normative Buddhism'. I have nowhere used this expression; and I do not know what it means. Having studied the Pāli Tripitaka for eight years under three Ceylonese Theras, and after five years spent in studying the Mahāyana texts, and after three years devoted to the study of Tibetan texts, and all the while being interested in the practical aspects of this religion, I am at a loss to understand this talk about "normative Buddhism", whatever Katz may feel about it. My purpose in the paper was merely to outline the development and crystallisation of what may be called Tibetan Buddhism from the **Bon** background and with Indian influences.