

Downpour of Virtue and Goodness
The Consecration Ritual based on the Dge-legs Char-'bebs
composed by the First Panchen Lama

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IT is by means of a consecration ritual that an image or a stupa is transformed into the nature of a Buddha. As the regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Sde-srid Sangs-rgyas-rgya-mtsho explained, the actual Buddha (*dharmakâya*) pervades everything, down to each of the countless particles which together make up the phenomenal world. One image commonly employed to illustrate this nature of the actual Buddha is the sesame seed and its oil: although the sesame seed may not seem to contain any fluid, plentiful oil is obtained once the hard seeds are pressed. Another popular image for the existence of the actual Buddha is space, which is everywhere. The actual Buddha is said to be naturally consecrated or naturally established everywhere. However, ordinary people may not always comprehend this, and thus the *tantras* teach the consecration of images, *stūpas*, *thangkas*, books and so forth. These holy objects serve to localize the presence of the actual Buddha in certain identifiable places, thereby making it available for worship and the accumulation of merit. Consecrated images and *stūpas* serve to create faith and devotion in those who see them and induce them to generate the mind of enlightenment. They are a source of blessing and auspiciousness. They aid in spreading the teachings of

the Buddha. By their power, calamities such as diseases, famines, and conflicts diminish.

The objects to be consecrated are considered as bases or receptacles of the Buddha's body, speech and mind. Images and *thangkas* are receptacles of the body; books, *dharaṇīs* and mantras are receptacles of speech; while *stūpas* and *tsha-tshas* (often small clay tablets, in this case in the shape of *stūpas*) are receptacles of the Buddha's mind. Buddhist temples and shrines usually contain all three types of receptacles.

A consecration is almost invariably performed soon after completion of a sacred receptacle. In the case of a major image, a *stūpa* or a temple, a high lama is invited to perform the ritual. Smaller receptacles, such as images or *thangkas* owned by individual householders or monastics, are usually brought to a monastery for consecration by its abbot, or by an incarnate lama (a *rinpoche*). The larger monasteries usually perform an elaborate consecration once a year in order to renew the consecration of their temples and sacred objects. Nearby householders and monastics often bring their receptacles for consecration or reconsecration on this occasion.

The expected results of the consecration are not solely dependent on the ritual proceedings, since the

prior realization and experience of the lama who performs it are considered crucial. Given two identical receptacles, one consecrated by a monk of no more than local renown, and the other by a lama who is widely esteemed, the latter receptacle will be considered superior. An object consecrated by the Dalai Lama is considered to be most exalted.

The 'Downpour of Virtue and Goodness' (*Dge-legs Char-'bebs*), when performed in its longer three-day version, is a very complex ritual. Located at its very core is the transformation of the receptacles into an Enlightened Being (*ye-shes-sems-dpa'*, *jñānasattva*). Here the consecration is accomplished using the rituals of Rdo-rje-'jigs-byed (Vajrabhairava), one of the most important 'chosen Buddhas' (*yi-dam*, *iṣṭadevatā*) of the Gelugpa school. In the first steps of this transformation, the material image is dissolved into emptiness. Then, out of emptiness, the chosen Buddha is visualized. Following this, the actual chosen Buddha, the Enlightened Being, is invited into the image and absorbed into the visualized one. The two are transformed into a nonduality (*gnyis-su-med-pa*, *advaya*). Through this process, the material image is transformed into the nature of the real nondual Buddha which pervades everywhere. Since only very few people can perceive the Buddha in such a manner, the process is concluded with a transformation of that nondual emptiness back into the original appearance of the image.

The effect of the consecration is to create an image endowed with the nondual emptiness of the actual Buddha, which nonetheless still functions in the world in the manner of an Emanation Body (*nirmāṇakāya*). Those endowed with yogic perceptions see consecrated images as if they were the Buddha themselves. The dissolution into nondual emptiness consists of the wisdom that understands emptiness, while the emergence back into the world of objects consists in employing skilful means (*upāya*), meaning compassion. This union of wisdom and compassion is the very foundation and core of the consecration ritual.

The core of the consecration thus far described cannot be performed as such, but requires still other rituals actions. The entire three-day consecration consists of a matrix of five rituals. Some of these rituals

serve as frames within which still other rituals are enclosed. These rituals will be described below in the order in which they are performed.

The performance is based on a ritual manual called *Dge-legs Char-'bebs*, 'Downpour of Virtue and Goodness' written by the first Panchen Lama (1570-1662). The Tibetan tradition of consecration relies very much on the *Consecration Tantra*, on specific consecration chapters in other tantras, and on commentaries written by Indian Buddhist pandits. Over the centuries, Tibetans have composed more than two hundred consecration manuals based on Indian tantras and their commentaries. The 'Downpour of Virtue and Goodness' relies on the first Gelugpa consecration text, which was composed by one of the disciples of Lord Tsongkhapa, 'Dul-'dzin Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan (1374-1434). According to its colophon, this manual was written on the basis of instructions received from Rje Tsongkhapa himself. The 'Downpour of Virtue and Goodness' is one of the most popular Gelugpa consecrations. In Namgyal Datsang, the monastery of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Downpour is performed every year on the holy day Lha-babs Dus-chen, which commemorates the descent of the Buddha Śakyamuni from Tuṣita Heaven after giving religious instruction to His mother for three months. This day falls on the twenty-second day of the ninth Tibetan month (in October or November).

The three-day performance is divided into three main parts—(i) preparatory rituals, (ii) main rituals, (iii) concluding rituals.

The First Day—Preparatory Rituals

On the first day, preparatory rituals are performed. No person, substance or implement involved in a Tibetan ritual performance can take part or be used in it in an ordinary worldly form. The performance begins with a process of *exaltation* which brings both performers and objects into a status appropriate for effecting the ritual purposes.

The ritual commences with the transformation of the performers into a chosen Buddha, in this case Vajrabhairava. Only as a Buddha can the performers transform an image into an actual Buddha. The generation of the performers into a chosen Buddha

consists of the following steps: visualization of the practitioners' dissolution into emptiness, visualization of themselves as the chosen Buddha, invitation of the Enlightened Beings and their absorption into the visualized Buddha, and finally, firmly sealing this merger by means of initiation. The process is very similar to the consecration itself and, in fact, serves as its model.

In order to assist in their visualizations during the initiation, the practitioners put on the clothing of the chosen Buddha in its Glorious Form (*sambhogakāya*). These clothes include a brocade stole standing for the upper garment, a piece of brocade which covers the lap representing the lower garment, a wig of hair tied into a triple top-knot, and a crown with the five Tathāgatas of the mandala. Spectators at the ritual will also observe that the performers place a red blindfold above their eyes, symbolizing their ignorance prior to their transformation into the chosen Buddha. The blindfold serves also to block ordinary appearances in preparation for the extraordinary perception of the world as a mandala.

Not only the participants, but also the ritual substances and implements require transformation. First to be transformed are the vases standing in front of the ritual master (this ritual action takes place prior to the initiation). The water of the Victorious Vase (*vijaya kalaśa*)—the one without the beaked spout—will also be transformed into the chosen Buddha. The water will be used in the initiation of both the performers and the receptacle as well as during the ritual sequences of the 'supreme bathing' of the receptacle. Spectators will see that on top of the Victorious Vase a small conch shell containing scented water is placed. On top of the conch is a very small *vajra*, around which a five-coloured thread is coiled. The ritual master holds the other end of this thread next to his own heart. The mantras he recites are conceived of as coiling along the thread, thereby transmitting his powers into the water. The water is only then transformed into the chosen Buddha. The Victorious Vase is a vase externally but internally it becomes a divine palace, the mandala of Vajrabhairava. The ritual master pours the water from the conch into the vase. Finally, the chosen Buddha within the vase dissolves and becomes 'one taste' with the water.

Generally, it is after the morning tea-break that the other ritual substances and implements undergo their transformation. These items include the eight bathing vases, the bathing substances, the grain which will be scattered over the image, *gugul* (incense used for fumigation) and white mustard. The last two substances are meant to be used for purification. All these items are placed on the bathing mandala—the tiered square structure surrounded by offerings. These transformations as well are effected with the help of the five-coloured thread extending from the ritual master to each item, one after the other. Each item becomes endowed with the capacity of effecting its ritual purpose.

Announcing the consecration

This is a highly dramatic moment in the ritual, in which all the monks, wearing their ceremonial robes, stand on their seats in order to announce the consecration (*samkalpa*). The announcement is accompanied by the offering of the grain, which was used in Tibet to represent flowers.

Generating the mind of enlightenment

The performers then kneel down to generate the mind of enlightenment. They take the *bodhisattva* vow to achieve enlightenment not just for themselves but to lead all sentient beings to enlightenment as well. This provides the performers and patrons with the proper religious and moral attitude. It reminds everyone that the purpose of such actions as consecrations is the attainment of enlightenment by all sentient beings.

The showing in the mirror

One more action must yet be completed before the transformation of the image may begin. Two monks put on their ceremonial yellow hats and ritual-offering clothing. One holds a ritual bronze mirror and the other an offering of incense. They invite the reflection of the image to allow itself to be captured in the mirror. Likewise, reflections of all the other objects to be consecrated are captured in the mirror, which is then placed at the centre of the large bathing mandala. The

consecration is performed upon the receptacle 'indirectly', by way of its reflection in the mirror.

From the point of view of ultimate truth, all phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature, like reflected images in a mirror. The consecration ritual, on the other hand, serves to localize a chosen Buddha in a specific object. As we have noted already, the actual Buddha is all-pervasive, and therefore cannot be established in anything particular. The localization process which takes place in the consecration ritual seems to contradict the Buddha's very nature. Therefore, the mirror is used symbolically to reiterate the Buddha's true nature of emptiness, while allowing the reflected image to 'take hold' in the phenomenal world.

The purifications

Before the Enlightened Beings can be invited into the image, the image needs to be purified. This ritual serves to purify the performers and patrons as well as to expel harmful spirits and mental impediments to a successful outcome. There are peaceful, half-wrathful and wrathful purifications. All the offerings and items used in purification are placed on a tray and handed over one by one to be offered by the ritual master, and each one is then passed down the row of monks. When it arrives at the end of the row, the ritual helper casts it outside.

Offering the bath

The bathing sequence serves as an opportunity for offerings, purifications and consecrations. It is conferred not on the image itself, but on its reflection in the mirror. Eight vases containing various ingredients and nine cleaning substances are used in the ordinary bathing (to be distinguished from the supreme bathing). The monks stand up and place an embroidered silk cloth on their left shoulders symbolizing the deities' clothes which are hung up before bathing. Each ritual assistant holds one of the eight vases or cleaning substances which are handed over in order to the ritual master. After the master symbolically performs the ablutions, the monks pass on the vase in their hand to the next monk in line, just as stones are passed from hand to hand in building a house. The offering of the

bath makes direct reference to the first bath offered to the Buddha Śakyamuni by Indra and Brahma as soon as He was born.

For the supreme bathing, and using their arms, the ritual master and ritual helper together 'construct' a square bathing pavilion with four pillars above the bathing mandala, a white silk cloth serving as a canopy. Unlike the ordinary bathing, the supreme bathing is conferred not by humans but by divinities. The main substance used in the supreme bath is the water of the Victorious Vase which was transformed into the chosen Buddha. While offering a bath, the monks recite:

Even though the Tathāgata is endowed with a supreme, pure body, by looking at which one cannot be satiated, marvellous, faultless, as the bright sun in the middle of the sky, (even though) there is no stain in the *dharmakāya*, still, as a rite of respect and honour, with pure water, herbs, incense, milk and bathing powder, having removed the suffering and disease from the body and mind of sentient beings, may I obtain a supreme, excellent body faultless and pleasing to sentient beings.

According to these verses, firstly, the object being bathed is totally pure and does not require any washing. Second, the bathing is a means of showing respect that accords with worldly conventions. Third, the ultimate purpose in offering a bath is the attainment of Buddhahood according to the Bodhisattva ideal. Finally, the bathing of the receptacle is meant to stand for the cleansing of the impurities of all sentient beings, as well as of the offerers' themselves.

The bathing sequence is conducted with the offering of fragrance, new garments and ornaments to the reflection of the image at the centre of the bathing mandala.

The invitation of the Enlightened Beings

After long purification and bathing sequences, by mid-afternoon the first day's performance reaches one of its climaxes, the preparatory actions for the invitation of the Enlightened Beings. The Enlightened Beings are invited to the space in front of the performers, and offerings are made to them. Then all the monks, holding their *vajras* and bells as well as an incense stick, request the invited Enlightened Beings for permission to perform the consecration on the following day. The Enlightened Beings grant their assent, offerings are made and praises chanted. Finally, the Enlightened Beings are requested to

depart to their abodes, but to return on the following day.

Concluding rituals

Rituals to assure protection for the image until the following day are performed. The mirror with its reflections is then covered by a yellow cloth. Thanksgiving ceremonies are held to express gratitude to the Buddhas for consenting to participate in the rituals. As in the conclusions of most other Tibetan rituals, an aspiration for oneself and all sentient beings to attain enlightenment is recited. The merit accumulated through the ritual performance is dedicated towards this end. Then the Buddhas are requested to forbear such faults as might have occurred during the performance. The first day is completed with the recitation of verses of auspiciousness.

The Second Day — the Main Part

Preliminaries

As on the first day, the main day of the ritual begins with the transformation of the performers into the chosen Buddha, then the self-initiation takes place, to be followed by the transformation of the various ritual items. The image is again visualized as the chosen Buddha, and the purifications and bathing sequences are repeated. The performers next announce the consecration and generate the mind of enlightenment. All this is done as it was on the first day.

Main part

Since on the main day the Enlightened Beings will be dissolved into the image visualized as the chosen Buddha, the body, speech and mind as well as the six senses of the visualized Buddhas are blessed. Thereby, the visualized Buddha becomes a suitable vessel for the Enlightened Beings. All the monks, holding the *vajra*, bell, and incense then invite the Enlightened Beings. Various offerings are made to them and they are requested to perform the consecration. The Enlightened Beings dissolve into the visualized ones and the two become indistinguishable, nondual, 'one taste'. This fusion is sealed by means of the initiation, which

includes the Five Tathāgatas' initiated together with the Vajrācārya initiation, secret initiation, wisdom-knowledge initiation, and the fourth initiation. This completes the transformation of the image into the nature of the actual Buddha.

Ancillary rituals

A fire-offering ritual (*homa*) is performed outdoors to promote 'increase'. This ritual of Vedic origin has the purpose of increasing life, wealth, strength, merit, wisdom, the study and practice of religion, and so forth. The specific aim of the consecration is to increase the effects of the consecration itself. That is to say, the fire offering augments the effects of the presence of a Buddha emanation in the particular locality. Although other recipients are not excluded, the main recipients of the offerings made to the fire are, in the present case, the Buddhas abiding in the consecrated image.

Then the eyes of the image are opened, using a small gold spoon and an ointment of honey and butter, so that the Buddhas abiding there will look with compassion upon sentient beings. This is followed by the opening of the other sensory faculties: the ears, nose, teeth and mouth. Then a feast (*gaṇacakra*) is celebrated. The feast offering and milk-and-rice porridge are eaten as remainders (*prasād*) of the Buddhas. The guardians are next bound to an oath to protect the image.

Transformation of the image

The actual Buddhas who abide in the image are now transformed into the appearance of the original image. Praises and common and specific offerings are made to them.

Enthronement offerings

One of the purposes of the consecration ritual is the creation of sacred objects worthy of offerings, and thereby serving as a basis for the accumulation of merit. The enthronement offerings, the first offerings made before the image when the consecration has rendered it as a worthy receptacle for offerings, is in a

way similar to a royal enthronement which authorizes a new monarch to rule. The enthronement offering consists of general offerings such as the four waters, the five *upacāras*, the five sense gratification offerings, inner offering, praises, the world mandala, the eight auspicious emblems, bath, garments, robes, ornaments, the seven precious possessions of a king, the five medicines, five grains, five jewels, five essences (such as salt, the essence of water, and honey, the essence of flowers), and so forth. These are followed by offerings specifically meant for the particular consecrated object. Images in the form of monks are offered monastic requisites such as razor and nail shears. Images of the Glorious Body are offered combs, ornaments and clothing. Offerings made to consecrated books are thrones, cloths for book wrappers, wooden binding boards, and binding straps. *Stūpas* are presented with central poles (*yaṣṭī*), wheels, crowns, flags, victory banners, parasols, flower garlands, and thrones. Most of these offerings are made by means of *tsakali* — small pictorial representations of the offerings mounted on a small wooden stick, which serve as a basis or support for the offerings visualized in their most magnificent forms.

Requesting the Buddhas to firmly remain in the image

The request to the Buddhas to remain in the image so long as any sentient being has still to reach unestablished nirvana is considered to be the climax of the consecration. All the monks don their ceremonial robes and hats. Holding blessed grains (representing flowers) in their hands, they recite the request to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to remain. The ritual helper holds up the large mirror. The consecrated reflection of the image in the mirror is considered to be transferred back into the original image. The consecrated reflection, which is none other than the chosen Buddha, is requested to firmly remain in the image and act for the benefit of sentient beings. The monks scatter the blessed grain on the image and recite verses of auspiciousness. The ritual master makes the presence of the Buddhas in the image firm by circling his right hand, holding the *vajras* three times around the body, speech and mind (represented by the head, throat and heart) of the image.

Concluding rituals

The main day is concluded in the same way as the first day with a thanksgiving ceremony, offerings and praises, aspirations to attain enlightenment, dedication of the accumulated merit towards enlightenment, a request to the Buddhas for forbearance in case of mistakes in the performance, and a request for extraordinary abilities (*siddhi*). The mandala of the chosen Buddha is dissolved and verses of auspiciousness are recited in closing.

The Third Day — Concluding Rituals

The third day begins with the transformation of the performers into the chosen Buddha. There follow long propitiation rituals for the various protectors who are given thanks for their support in the proceedings; offerings are made to them, they are requested to remain and provide assistance in the future as well. Next, a fire-offering ritual for the purpose of pacification is performed outdoors. While the purpose of the fire-offering on the main day is the increase of everything desired, the pacifying fire-offering here is meant to pacify everything inauspicious, including obstacles, calamities, illness, sin, transgressions of religious vows and so forth. Specifically, the fire ritual is performed on the last day in order to compensate for any omissions or other errors that might have been committed in the course of the ritual.

The afternoon of the last day is dedicated for the most part to rituals directed toward the patrons. Since the patrons are participants in the ritual, they need, like any other participant, to be transformed into the chosen Buddha. This is done in a similar manner to the transformation of the disciples into the chosen Buddha at the beginning of the initiation. The patrons enter the ritual ground, make prostrations and offer ceremonial scarves to both the ritual master and the image. The ritual master entrusts the consecrated image to the patrons and commands them to look after it well, and to make regular offerings. The ritual master takes this opportunity to explain to the patrons the purpose of the consecration ritual and its history. The master may also tell the history of the construction and consecration of certain important images, *stūpas* or temples, as well as the benefits of engaging in such

virtuous activities. Then, in appreciation of their sponsorship, the eight auspicious substances (each of these was once offered to the Buddha Śākyamuni), which are considered to be capable of removing all misfortune and bestowing all perfections according to one's wishes, are given to the patrons. Finally, the patrons offer their gifts to the ritual master and other performers.

Like the preceding days, the day is concluded with thanksgivings, aspiration prayers, dedication of merit, praises to the protectors, and verses of auspiciousness.

Final remarks

The practice of consecration and the use of images in

Buddhism as well as the other religions of India has often been brushed aside as something unworthy of Buddhism's deep philosophy and its actualization of the highest human potentialities. We hope that, by showing how thoroughly the Tibetan Buddhist consecration ritual is imbued with those same elements of deep philosophy and sublime human striving, some of the objections to image worship will be reduced or done away with. Somewhere in the midst of the interplay of memory and aspiration, we humans produce an image of that which we might possibly become, given the energy and opportunity. The worship of this sort of mental image is natural when linked to a physical support by someone who has realized what it is all about.

