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Living in the Sacred Cosmos

THE COSMOS, THEN, IS A VAST ARENA OF LIFE AND ACTIVITY, WITH MANY LEVELS AND KINDS OF BEINGS. Human beings are just one clan, so to speak, among many others. Even the other clans within samsara – the gods, jealous gods, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings – form part of one large grouping and, beyond the boundaries of the samsaric grouping, there are others. Each sort of being, whether trapped in cyclic existence or free from it, has its own mode of being and its own “place” within the whole. Those who are considered awakened have a mode of being and a “location” that is inconceivable to ordinary human beings. But this very inconceivability is, in a sense, a “place” from our ordinary point of view because it locates them outside of the cycle of transmigration.

None of these beings, whatever level they represent, is unconnected or irrelevant to human life. In fact, we humans are one part of a vast, interconnected web of relationships with all other inhabitants of the cosmos, both those still living within delusion and those who are awakened.

An awareness of these relationships is critical because, to a very large extent, who we are as humans is defined by this network of relations. To be able to know this fact, and to take responsibility for it, gives us a dignified and directed human life. Within Tibetan tradition, the isolated individual – the one who is unaware of the vast cosmos of beings within which we live and who attempts to live as if it did not exist – is lost. He is a *dundro*, an animal-realm being in human form, controlled by ignorance, with its nose to the ground.

Our interconnectedness with the rest of the cosmos rests on deep foundations. Most fundamentally, we share with all other beings the inherent core of buddha-nature – the inner, awakened state that dwells at the heart of all sentient beings as their inmost essence. We might consider all beings as having, like us, membership in the same great family – just as we view our children and our parents equally as family members, even though they are at earlier or later stages of life than we are. In a similar way, we are at a certain stage in our spiritual evolution. The others in the vast sea of being are at other stages in the very same process. Insects, for example, represent an earlier phase in this process, fully awakened buddhas a later one. But fundamentally, we are all made of the same stuff, so to speak.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF BEINGS

Our Connection to Beings within Samsara

We are intimately interconnected with all other inhabitants of the six realms because, besides possessing the same buddha-nature as they, we have their lives and their specific destinies written within us. We are related with all beings within samsara, because we humans have been reborn, time out of mind, in every other condition and mode of sentient existence, as hell-beings, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, jealous gods, and gods, not once or on a few occasions, but countless times. Within the animal realm, we have lived as amoebas, insects, all the way up to the most intelligent mammals, over and over. We share the same history of suffering and happiness with every other being within the six realms.

In addition, not one of these countless births is lost to us. According to Tibetan tradition, every experience we have had as a sentient being remains indelibly within us as subliminal memory, imprinted on our inmost consciousness, that part of us which goes on from birth to birth. We may not be conscious of ever having been a bird or a lion, and we may have no memories even of our previous birth; yet the experiences of these and all other lifetimes since beginningless time continue to shape and inform how we experience our human life right now. When we look at a frog or a butterfly, on some level we understand

that life form because in other times and places we have *been* a frog and a butterfly. If our intelligence is clear and our heart unobstructed, we have open access to this understanding. Most of us, however, are governed by utilitarian motives, and we view the frog or butterfly in self-serving terms. The frog may be something to eat or provoke revulsion; the butterfly may be seen as an object of beauty or as something to complete our butterfly collection. Either way, however, our memory of having been a frog or a butterfly – or a hungry ghost or a god for that matter – is alive and active at a deep level within us.

It is interesting to see how differently adults react to children, depending on how much access they have to their own childhood. The more we remember being children – the more we can still feel the joys and sorrows of the experience – the more understanding of our own children we will have, the more kindness we will show, and the more accurate we will be in our guidance of them. On the other hand, some of us cannot remember ever having been children or, for whatever reason, feel hatred and disgust toward this period of our lives. In such cases, it is far more difficult to understand or genuinely love a child. In just the same way, the more we are aware of our own karmic history, the more understanding we will have of the various kinds of beings within samsara, the more kinship we will feel with them, and the more compassion we will have.

Awareness of connection with other beings within samsara is a matter of the utmost importance for our own happiness and fulfillment. If we are unaware of our relatedness with other people, for example, and habitually view them solely as objects for our own entertainment or aggrandizement, we are violating our own sense of connection with them and creating the seeds for future problems for ourselves. Likewise, if we ignore our natural connectedness with animals, viewing them as “fair game” and perhaps killing them for our own pleasure, we are again acting against our inner awareness. In both examples, it is like throwing more and more garbage into the clear well of our inherent nature. In such cases, we are sowing seeds of future confusion and suffering for ourselves.

From the Tibetan point of view, as one moves along the path of spiritual development, one’s feelings of kinship with other beings within the cosmos gradually increases. Those of us who are at more preliminary levels of this path will have little or no awareness of linkage with others. As we progress, our sense of relatedness increases. At higher stages of spiritual maturation, one will feel a strong sense of connection to all other beings and an obligation to help them. Fully enlightened buddhas are said to remember every birth they have ever had, as if it were only yesterday. They remember because every experience of every birth is recorded within them, and by virtue of their awakening, the record is completely open.

Our Connection with Enlightened Beings

We are not only in a state of intimate relation with all other beings within samsara. In addition, we are deeply connected with all the various enlightened beings who pervade time and space. This is so because the hearts of the awakened ones are just the same as ours: the buddha-nature. The only difference between us and them is that in our case, the buddha-nature is covered over with veils and hidden, while in them it is fully uncovered and manifest.

It is indicative that when we meet human teachers of high realization, we often have intense reactions. We may feel tremendously strong emotions of love and longing, or perhaps fear and dread. These emotions are a sign of our connection with them. In that teacher we are – in a very real sense – meeting our own future, face to face. We see what we are fated to become, what we *must* become in order to fulfill our own inherent destiny. How could we not in some way be deeply moved by such a meeting?

In revered teachers, a state of realization is embodied in human form. In the celestial buddhas and high-level bodhisattvas, the embodiment is more ethereal and not within the human realm. Nevertheless it is not only possible but essential that, as we go along the path, we also discover and deepen our sense of commonality with these nonmaterial, awakened ones. According to Tibetan tradition, in fact, as we

mature, the “sky draws closer to the earth,” so to speak, and the celestial buddhas and bodhisattvas seem more and more our ever-present protectors, mentors and guides.

RITUAL: COMMUNICATING WITH THE UNSEEN WORLD

As human beings, we are fated to act constantly. Even “doing nothing” can be a powerful act, and like any other form of action, it has its karmic consequences. In addition, all our actions are *in relation* – to all those beings with whom we are in connection, and whatever we do has an impact on them. Within Tibetan tradition, to know this and to act in accordance with it is to take responsibility for one’s human life.

Of the various beings within samsara, it is only other humans and animals that are normally visible. And even of these, we are only aware of a tiny portion. The beings of the other realms – those of the hells, the hungry ghost realms, the jealous gods, and the gods – are ordinarily invisible. Likewise, we ordinarily cannot see the various spiritual beings that surround us and exist throughout space, realized teachers who have died, high-level bodhisattvas, the various protectors, the fully enlightened buddhas, and so on. And yet, in the Tibetan perspective, to live a genuinely human and fruitful life, we need to discover our relation with all these various beings of samsara and beyond, and to act in ways appropriate to our connection. Within Tibetan tradition, the way to do this is through ritual (*choga*).

The Language of Ritual

Ritual is action that expresses a relationship. It is the vehicle of communication with another and is itself that communication. Ritual may be performed in relation to beings whom we know and see, and also in relation to those in normally invisible realms.

When we pass people on the street, we act in certain ways depending on our relationship with them. If we do not know them and do not wish to know them, we may lower our eyes and avoid their glance. If it is a good friend, we may smile and greet them warmly, perhaps shaking hands. If it is someone we do not like, we may frown and move away. These gestures are all ritualized behaviors that express our relation with the other and also reaffirm that relation. We can also use simple rituals like these to alter our relations. Perhaps there is someone with whom we have had difficulty and we want to change the relationship. As we approach them, instead of doing the expected and averting our gaze, we may look at them and smile. Such a simple ritual has the power to change the course of our own and the other’s history. Each of these actions – smiling, frowning, looking at someone, looking away, shaking hands – is part of a ritual vocabulary used in our culture to communicate various kinds of relationships.

In Tibetan Buddhism, ritual is used in relation both to the seen and the unseen world. In Tibet, different vocabularies are used in different instances, depending on which beings one wishes to be in relation with. In each case, one engages in ritual to express one’s link and to communicate. In the pages that follow, we will examine ritual in more detail. At this point, I wish to provide some basic orientation to the general topic and its role within Tibetan tradition.

The essence of ritual is communication. Why do we need to communicate with other beings? Because communication is the exchange of energy and experience. As human beings on the spiritual path, we need continually to be in a process of exchange with others, both seen and unseen. Other beings have things to give us, and we have things to give them. Human life is a process of learning and growing, and this is always a mutual enterprise. The only way this occurs is through the give and take of communication. The pathways of this exchange are our interconnectedness with other beings. Ritual opens these pathways and allows exchange and communication to occur. Moreover, to progress in our

journeys, we need to be in a communicative relation not only with those who are further along than we are, but also with those who are in various states of sorrow, below us.

Ritual Relations with Samsaric Beings

The relations that we have with other beings, both visible and invisible, are infinitely varied and complex. With some beings we have a particular connection, a “karmic link” or “karmic debt.” Those we are in a position to help are ones with whom our link is especially strong. With beings who are far removed from us, our connection is weaker.

For example, among the six realms, our fellow human beings, animals, and hungry ghosts – the pretas – are close to us. Other human beings, because they have the same conditions as us are the closest, and we are continually interacting with them. We also have many opportunities to interact with animals, and because we humans are in a privileged position, we need to act with kindness and take an attitude of protection toward them. Traditional Tibetan Buddhists prefer not to harm even the smallest insect. Saving animals destined for slaughter is particularly meritorious. Hungry ghosts are also close to us because, though normally invisible, they hover around human situations, looking for kindness and nourishment. Sometimes the pretas become visible in the form of ghosts or spirits. They may be spirits of considerable power who insist on their needs by creating obstacles for us. We need to provide help to the pretas both for our own benefit and for theirs.

In Tibetan Buddhism the way to address the needs of hungry ghosts is through specific rituals. As described below, we arrange certain kinds of offerings, ritually empower them with our energy in the form of kindness and good intentions, and then make them available to the pretas. By so doing, we can give them something they desperately desire. For as beings living in the human realm, we are in a unique position to feed their spiritual need, to provide nourishment that alone can allay the terrible hunger and thirst that they, as pretas, continually feel. This nourishment only alleviates their suffering but, through a strengthened sense of relation with us, brings them closer to a human rebirth. Through this kind of ritual, we not only provide assistance to those in great need, but remove the obstructing influences they may be sending our way and generate an overall better karmic situation for ourselves.

Beings in the god realms or the hell realms are somewhat more removed from us. In Tibetan Buddhism, a ritual relation is nevertheless maintained with them, although it does not have the tangibility of the relations that we have with other humans, animals and the hungry ghosts. For example, it is considered important that one make a daily ritual reaffirmation of one’s wish that all beings, from those in the deepest hells to those in the highest heavens, may travel the road to liberation.

By way of another example, in a practice described below called *tonglen*, “sending and taking,” we perform a contemplation in which we picture beings in each of the six realms, beginning with the hell realms. We visualize their pain and try to feel what they are experiencing. Through our remembrance of them, they are not forgotten and the solitude of their suffering is broken. Moreover, our hearts are opened and the compassion of our inmost nature is released, and we are able to send them relief. In a similar way, one by one, we take each of the other realms and vividly picture the suffering of the beings within it and, experiencing it, send relief. Even the gods, though generally blissful, in their own ways suffer, for the effort required to maintain their ignorance of the pain of others represents a subtle but very real dimension of suffering. Therefore we carry out the same contemplation for them.

In a similar way, there is an “initiation into the six realms” that is performed in Tantric Buddhism in which one is able to “practice” each of the realms. Through the practice, one is able mentally and emotionally to enter into each of the six realms, for a period of time, and experience its joys and its sorrows. In Tibet, six-realm retreats were sometimes undertaken with a guru, who would lead a group through days of experience of each of the six realms. The point of this kind of practice is to bring awareness of beings throughout the various samsaric worlds, to know their experience intimately, and to

awaken compassion for them. This is felt to be of immediate and direct benefit to them if for no other reason than that their existence is known and their suffering felt by another. In addition, because one's awareness is educated and the flames of compassion are fanned, one makes oneself more available to benefit others one meets in life.

Ritual Relations with the Awakened Ones

The essence of Tibetan Buddhism is communication with the awakened ones – departed masters, bodhisattvas, buddhas, and so on. We call them to mind, open our hearts to them, and receive their blessings. The way we do this is through ritual. One of the most common ritual means for this is the sevenfold offering of Mahayana Buddhism: one visualizes the being or beings in question, then [1] offers salutation, [2] makes real and imagined good offerings, [3] confesses one's shortcomings and harm of others, [4] rejoices at the existence of the awakened being who is the beloved object of devotion, [5] requests them to teach, thus expressing one's openness and longing for instruction, [6] asks them to remain in connection with suffering, samsaric beings and not disappear into nirvana, and [7] dedicates whatever merit or goodness one has accumulated to the welfare of all beings. In this simple, brief rite, one makes a link with the transcendent ones, affirming and actualizing a specific kind of relationship with them.

The reason that we can do this in the first place is that the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and departed masters already represent who we most essentially are and must in fact become. This is why, in Tibetan Buddhism, even the most devotional supplication to the most seemingly external being is not finally theistic. For, in truth, we are longing to meet our deepest selves face-to-face, and we are supplicating our own hidden being. The path to this goal is first, to discover our inmost being in the other, the awakened one, and then, through relationship with him or her, gradually to come to awareness of that transcendent nature within ourselves.

As we shall see below, there are many ritual stages along this path to awakening. What they share, however, is visualization. We create a mental picture of a departed teacher, a high-level bodhisattva, or a buddha. Then we carry out a ritual in which we open ourselves and communicate with this being in various ways, ritually participating in his or her awakening. In this way, we cultivate our own awakened state.

This process of visualization is a powerful one. For example, in our ordinary life, what we do not visualize as existing does not exist for us. If we do not *see* another person as human, then for us their humanity does not exist. The same is that much more true for beings who live in nonmaterial forms outside of samsara. We may be surrounded by buddhas and bodhisattvas all the time, but until they have a shape and a name, we do not see them or have access to a relationship with them. For us they might as well not exist. But the moment we give them a form in our mind and begin to communicate with them, they exist and their wisdom, compassion, and power can enter into our own systems.* It is the many ritual forms of Tibetan Buddhism that enable us to do this.

* Some people may feel that they do not know how to visualize as described here. The fact is that, as human beings, we are visualizing all the time. When we see a person we know, we visualize him or her as this person we know, calling up all of our past memories and recognition. We can see how this works in instances where we mistakenly think we see someone we know on the street. We have the experience of seeing this actual person, only to discover that it is not that person at all and we were mistaken.

Ritual and Western Buddhism

Within traditional Tibet, the reality of ritual is simply accepted as a matter of course. It is assumed that just as there are forms by which to relate to other human beings, so there are other forms, called rituals, that are used to communicate with the nonhuman and nonmaterial realms.

The status of ritual among Western followers of Tibetan Buddhism is, however, more in question. Many have felt unable to entertain ideas of reincarnation or of the six realms. For them, many of the traditional Tibetan rituals dealing with other beings and other realms do not make sense. Sometimes this extends to thinking that even talk of nonmaterial buddhas, bodhisattvas, and protectors is “symbolic” and that there is nothing that really corresponds to these designations. In that case, many of the Tibetan liturgies are seen as directed to no real object, but are rather understood as psychological ploys to bring about certain effects.

Even if we Westerners do pay lip service to the traditional Tibetan cosmological ideas, often – as Jeremy Hayward has argued – we remain at heart what he calls “scientific materialists” (1999). In other words, while we may accept the idea of other realms and other beings within and outside of samsara, we do not actually believe in them. Instead, we live as if the world were dead and this reality the only one that exists.

This attitude is reflected in many Westerners’ difficulties with Tibetan ritual. Among Western practitioners, there is frequently a kind of dead feeling in ritual, and many of us fall back on the idea that rote repetition, without any particular engagement or feeling, is sufficient. We fall back, in other words, on attitudes to ritual learned in our upbringing, where simply to be physically present was all that was required. In order to survive the many meaningless rituals we may have been subjected to, we also learned to disengage ourselves psychologically and to occupy our time with thinking about other things. What is missing here is the understanding that ritual is a way of communicating with beings who, on the relative plane, *really are there* and *really are important to us*. This lively and compelling sense of ritual is, at present, sometimes hard to come by in Western adaptations of Tibetan Buddhism.

THE ANATOMY OF A COMMON TIBETAN RITUAL: THE LHASANG

The *lhasang* – literally “higher purification offering,” which may be glossed as “invocation of the higher beings” – is one of the most common rituals in traditional Tibet. While some rituals are performed strictly for temporal ends and others for spiritual ends, the *lhasang* is interesting because it is performed for both mundane and supermundane purposes. And, while most rituals are directed to a particular being, the *lhasang* is a broad invocation that calls upon all the various “good spirits” and well-intentioned deities, as well as upon the various buddhas, bodhisattvas, protectors, and departed teachers of the buddhadharma. Because of its broad conception, the *lhasang* is multipurpose. On the one hand, it is performed by laypeople: in times of duress or special need, the male head of the household will do a *lhasang* on behalf of the entire family. On the other hand, lamas will also perform the *lhasang* on various special occasions, before a journey, on a special holy day, to support the construction of a building, to bless an important object. In the Western practice of Tibetan Buddhism, the *lhasang* is a popular and often-performed ceremony both because it is applicable to almost any situation and because it is simple and accessible.

The purpose of the *lhasang* may be described as twofold. First, it is a ritual of purification, cleansing people and places of any obstructions, obstacles, or negative forces. The fire and the purifying smoke are held to embody a powerful energy that dispels the defilements and negativities of those present. Second, the *lhasang* is an empowerment in that it brings down blessings in the form of wisdom, efficacy, and power. Juniper is typically burned in the *lhasang* fire, and the fragrant smoke travels up to the heavens, attracting the higher beings of samsara and the enlightened ones; thus the smoke becomes a kind of passageway or lightning rod down which their blessings can descend, filling participants with a sense of

well-being, understanding, and happiness. Many different lhasang rituals were used in Tibet, depending on locale, lineage, and specific purpose. The following summarizes the general format typically possessed by lhasang ceremonies.

Prelude

Prior to the actual lhasang ritual, a hearth or fire pit is constructed, usually out of doors. The green boughs of juniper are collected and laid out by the ritual site. Juniper is typically selected – sometimes along with other aromatic woods such as cedar – because its smoke is especially fragrant and pleasing to the gods. The fire is lit and allowed to burn down so that the heat of glowing coals predominates, rather than open flame. The juniper may be doused with water, as wet juniper produces a heavier and more aromatic smoke. When the officiant is prepared to begin the invocation, the boughs are laid on the coals, and, within moments, the white, fragrant smoke begins to billow up to the sky.

Invocation

The ritual now begins with an invocation to all-powerful and helpful forces, both those within samsara and those beyond it. The invocation is a way of calling these beings to attention and inviting their presence at the liturgical performance of the lhasang. The invocation will usually address general categories of beings and also more specifically particular protectors, bodhisattvas, departed teachers, local deities, and so on. On the general level, then, the lhasang might call upon the three jewels (Buddha, dharma, and sangha), the three bases of Buddhist practice (gurus, yidams, and dakinis), and whatever gods and sages there may be. More specifically, one might invoke certain protectors, the three bodhisattvas most important to Tibetan Buddhism (Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, and Vajrapani), Guru Rinpoche, other lineage figures, and the like.

Offering

Once the invocation has caused the multitude of helpful beings to gather, offerings are made. The offerings consist both of actual physical substances and those that are conceived with the imagination. The actual or material substances that are offered into the fire vary depending on the intentions of the ritual and the elaborateness that is desired. The juniper, of course, is already being offered, and this consists of the basic offering ingredient. Other material substances may include different kinds of grains, other desirable food substances, varieties of alcohol, and other things that may be deemed attractive to the invited unseen guests. At this time, mental offerings are made, consisting of the visualization of all the good and fine things that the world has to offer. Sometimes to Westerners, the imagined offerings seem less consequential and important than those that are physical. In a Buddhist context, however, the act of holding precious things in mind and then offering them can be equally powerful, whether they are material or not.

The Supplication for Assistance

The invocation has gathered the unseen beings, and the offerings have formed a link between those beings and the human practitioners of the ritual. Next follows the request for assistance, which usually includes two parts. In the first, one supplicates for protection against obstacles and other forms of negativity. This negativity in itself is both inner and outer. Inner obstacles or obstructions might include illness, emotional disturbances, resistance, and any other inner impediments to well-being and successful dharma practice. Outer obstacles – as articulated in Tibetan tradition – include the enmity of others in the form of curses, lawsuits, warfare and other forms of attack, as well as disasters such as failing crops, plague, or famine.

While the first kind of request made in the supplication is for purification of oneself and the removal of external obstacles, the second is for empowerment. Now one requests that one be filled with both mundane and transmundane power and well-being. On the mundane level, one asks for health, material prosperity, and happiness. On the transmundane level, one supplicates for the increase of successful dharma practice, insight, compassion, and a closer relation with one's lineage.

In Buddhism, it is of course believed that all things occur based on causes and conditions. However, the beings of the unseen world, each in his or her own way, are powerful participants in the realm of causality. Worldly deities represent critical, vulnerable points in the way things transpire in the world. By invoking them, making offerings, and supplicating them to provide assistance, it is as if one were relating to a worldly monarch who is all-powerful. Though still within the web of causality, he is able in a unique way to bring about effects and respond to one's needs.

When it is great bodhisattvas and enlightened beings that one is supplicating, their power is that much greater. Particularly within a Western context and with our "otherworldly" religious heritage, one might question whether it is appropriate to ask buddhas for help with, for example, sickness. Aren't they only interested in enlightenment? It is the same as asking whether a realized master would care about our physical suffering and have any interest in helping us recover. For Buddhism, physical and emotional obstacles, while they are with us, can be powerful teachers. But they can also prevent us from engaging in the practice of dharma and from helping others. Poverty, political oppression, and other obstacles can similarly be impediments to the ultimate welfare and spiritual progress of oneself and others. In the traditional Tibetan context, it is believed that the buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as the human teachers and gurus, look with kindness upon human woe and its relief. They will help where it is appropriate and where they can. At the same time, in every human life, there are sorrows and sufferings that remain our companions; these the practitioner is to regard as expressions of the compassion of the awakened ones, who are holding us closely to teach and train us.

Mantras That Bring Down Power

Typically, the supplication is followed by the repetition of various mantras, series of syllables often with no rational meaning. These are often in Sanskrit, considered the original language of Buddhism and thus particularly holy and efficacious. These mantras are mostly drawn from various powerful sources within Tibetan Buddhism. For example, at this section in the lhasang one might find the syllables OM MANI PADME HUM, the universally known and revered mantra of Avalokiteshvara, or OM AH HUM VAJRA GURU PADMA SIDDHI HUM, the most important mantra of Padmasambhava. In Vajrayana Buddhism, the mantras embody in sound the essence of particular buddhas, protectors, or departed gurus. In saying them, one is directly and powerfully connecting with those beings to whom one is making the supplication.

As the mantra section of lhasang is being chanted, participants may circumambulate the fire, circling it in a clockwise fashion, allowing the juniper smoke to wash over them and bring a more tangible sense to their purification. At this time, it is also common for people to pass various objects through the smoke to purify them, such as clothes one might wear on important occasions or implements used in religious work, such as paintbrushes, sculpting tools, and so on. Trungpa Rinpoche comments, however, that it would not be appropriate to include in this process ritual implements such as *malas* (rosaries) or bells, which are already pure by their very nature.

Coda

The lhasang now concludes, perhaps with a restatement of what is desired, perhaps with a particularly powerful mantra. The following particularly sacred Sanskrit mantra might well form part of this coda:

OM YE DHARMA HETU-PRABHAVA HETUM TESHAM TATHAGATO HYAVADAT
TESHAM CA YO NIRODHA EVAM VADI MAHASHRAMANAH SVAHA

This mantra represents one of the oldest statements of Buddha Shakyamuni's teaching, found in the Pali canon and elsewhere. Roughly translated, it means, "Whatever phenomena (dharma) arise from a cause, the cause of them the Tathagata has taught, as well as the cessation thereof. Just so has the great ascetic declared." The coda puts the finishing touches on the lhasang liturgy and seals its intentions.

CONCLUSION

Rituals are performed in Tibetan Buddhism for many different purposes, both spiritual and temporal, and the atmosphere surrounding them obviously varies depending on the situation. General rituals, such as the lhasang described here, are occasions for enjoyment and celebration. This is a natural result of the character of ritual as festive and social in the broadest sense. In the lhasang, the usually invisible powers that undergird and transcend our world are invited as guests of honor. The offerings that are made to them represent a kind of feast that re-establishes one's connection with them and invites their participation in the life of the community. Through the ritual, one is led to take a larger view of one's life and one's world. In Tibetan ritual, one experiences a shift in perspective – sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic. This shift feels like a diminishing of one's sense of isolated individuality and an increase in one's sense of connectedness with other people, with the nonhuman presences of our realm, and with purposes that transcend one's usual self-serving motivations.

In the lhasang, the shift in perspective can often be quite tangible. Perhaps as the smoke rises up to the sky, the wind abruptly picks up; perhaps a bank of clouds suddenly comes over the mountains or a cloudy sky breaks up and a brilliant burst of sunlight appears. Perhaps an eagle is suddenly seen overhead or the air abruptly becomes more sparkling. Whatever the signs, if the ritual has been done with a whole heart, some kind of confirmation from the nonhuman world may be expected. The shift is also atmospheric, giving birth to relaxation, humor, and expansive joy.

Ritual is a way of reconnecting with the larger and deeper purposes of life, ones that are oriented toward the general good conceived in the largest sense. Ironically, through coming to such a larger and more inclusive sense of connection and purpose, through rediscovering oneself as a member of a much bigger and more inclusive enterprise, one feels much more oneself and grounded in one's own personhood. Through ritual, one's energy and motivation are roused and mobilized so that one can better fulfill the responsibilities, challenges, and demands that life presents.