Endless Circles: Circumambulation in Tibet

by

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Abstract

Circumambulation is a universal cultural phenomenon. In Tibetan society, it is not only a particularly religious practice, but also the ritual embodiment of the Tibetan ethos. This research examines the types of circumambulation and their symbolic meanings in Tibet. Through specific expressions in ethnographic accounts of circumambulation based on field study and literature review, two core elements of circumambulation are identified: a center of sacredness, and circular movement around this center. By analysis of the concept of sacredness and the symbolic meanings of the circle and circular movement, I establish a concentric circular model of circumambulation to interpret it in the Tibetan context. I use the concept of sacred gravitation to explore the relationship between sacredness and people as expressed in the form of circumambulation and how circumambulation acts as the symbolic medium in this relationship.

Preface

Research Ethics Approval

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Imaginary Tibet

Geographically, Tibet is a plateau region in Asia with an average elevation of 5,000 meters and a harsh, oxygen-deficient, desert environment with extreme weather. It is famous for its natural beauty, including Mt. Everest. Culturally, Tibet is a religious land where most people piously believe in Tibetan Buddhism, or Bon. For most Western people, however, Tibet is the symbol of peace and eternity, the kingdom of Buddhism, and the Shangri-La of the world and of their own minds. Why is this faraway and exotic civilization so prevalent since the 1960s in mainstream Western culture? The "Tibet" of Western societies is actually an imaginary Tibet made by them and has become an inherent part of the knowledge of Oriental studies in Western academia. This imaginary Tibet in popular Western culture usually comes with the Dalai Lama, Tantra, erotic yoga, and sympathy for the political status of Tibet. Karl Marx, as quoted in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, said that: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Said 1979: xiii).

Tibet has appeared in Western documents since as early as the 5th century BC. In Herodotus' *The Histories*, it is mentioned that there was an ethnic group residing to the north of India and a special kind of ant that could dig for gold sand (Kaschewsky 2001: 3). Similarly, Tibetan oral traditions tell of gold-digging ants and also in Tibetan chronicles (Kaschewsky 2001: 3). Although Tibet as a name did not exist in Herodotus, the terms Hai Bautai and Ho Bautisos, respectively the name of a tribe and a river in Tibet, mentioned by Claudius Ptolemy in his *Geographia* around 1st century AD (Kaschewsky 2001: 4). He also mentions a copper-colored mountain located in the Malaya mountain range which corresponds to Padmasambhava's copper-colored mountain palace (Kaschewsky 2001: 4). Although scholars still debate whether Marco Polo ever arrived in China, we have good evidence that he visited Amdo, a part of Tibet, according to his description of lamas' magic. It was through *The Travels of Marco Polo* that Europeans started to know more about Tibet (Shen 2010: 110).

The initial contact the Western world made with Tibet was because of the search for Prester John (also known as Presbyter Johannes), a legendary medieval Christian king of Asia, whose legends were popular in Europe from the 12th to 17th centuries. It was said that he was a descendant of the Magi and ruled over a Christian nation in the Orient as a Christian patriarch and king (Rachewiltz 1996: 61-63). According to different legends, Prester John dwelled in different places: India, Central Asia, or Ethiopia (Rachewiltz 1996: 73). Some missionaries believed that Tibetans were the descendants of Prester John and went to Central Asia to find them. The legends of Prester John reflected Europeans' fantastical dreams and imaginings about the Orient, including the pursuit of wealth, missionary zeal, and also obscure knowledge about Oriental civilizations (Taylor 1999: 1-3). Through these processions of Christian dissemination in the Orient, missionaries collected original

documents about Tibet, first by compiling Tibetan dictionaries and building knowledge of Tibet in Orientalism. To some extent, they built Tibetology in Europe.

During the Enlightenment, Oriental civilizations became more popular in European academia. Many philosophers were interested in Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Johann Gottfried Herder. All have made positive or negative comments about the philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism and its method of self-cultivation (Bishop 2001: 206-206, Dagyab Kyabgon Rinpoche 2001: 381-382, Korom 2001: 177). At this time, interest in Tibet was still restricted to academia; however, Helena Blavatsky and her Theosophical Society extolled Tibet to the Western world in the late 19th century. Her beliefs was a forerunner of the New Age movement, and one of her remarkable deeds was her self-proclaimed telepathic ability with lamas, saying that all her compositions were written through telepathy. Although it has been proved that her works were not actually related to Tibetan Buddhism, but rather a hodgepodge of Western and Oriental occultism, her followers spread all over the world, including such celebrities as: D. T. Suzuki, Alexandra David-Neel, Giuseppe Tucci, Carl Jung, and Edward Conze (Pedersen 2001: 156-157).

In the 20th century, Tibet came into the popular view and the mass media of the Western world. There were some landmark books and people publicizing the Tibetan culture during this period. In 1927, Walter Evans-Wentz, follower of Helena Blavatsky, translated and published *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz 1927); this book has become one of the classics of Oriental spiritualism, though many Tibetans do not know it. Another book was the novel *Lost Horizon* (Hilton 1933) written by James Hilton in 1933. After the publication of this book, Shangri-La, a fictional utopia, made Western readers believe that it is the spiritual home for their minds, and it is Tibet where Shangri-La located (Hansen 2001: 104).

By these means, the process of mythicizing Tibet had begun; dim impressions of Tibet turned to conceptions of a peaceful, isolated Buddhist kingdom where people could escape from the real world, especially after World War II.

According to Padmasambhava's prophecy in the 8th century AD: "When the iron bird flies and horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the face of the earth, and the dharma will come the land of the red men" (Powers 1995: 186). After 1959, when the Chinese government suppressed a Tibetan rebellion and the fourteenth Dalai Lama fled Tibet to establish the Tibetan Government in Exile in Dharamsala, India, Tibet started to enter into the public view of the Western world. More and more Rinpoches came to Europe and North America and built religious institutions to spread some of the secret cultivation methods of Tibetan Buddhism, to laymen instead of only religious practitioners as traditionally done before. To face modern society, Tibetan Buddhism has had to learn how to adapt to westerners to survive. The archetypal example must be the Shambhala that was founded by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in the 1970s. He founded the Shambhala Center and created a secular practice combining the Tibetan Buddhism with other Oriental customs like calligraphy and *chanoyu*—the Japanese tea ceremony—to attract and suit westerners (Shambhala Offical Website 2014). His son and also the successor Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche later named this new kind of Tibetan Buddhism as Shambhala Buddhism in 2000.

During the "Tibet fever" in Western society that started in the 1960s, a generation of Tibetologists attracted to Tibetan Buddhism and supporting Tibetan freedom appeared in the United States. Representative figures include Jeffery Hopkins and Robert Thurman. The latter is the father of Hollywood star Uma Thurman, and was formerly a lama in Dharamsala; he later returned to secular life and taught at Columbia University (Shen 2010: 121-122).

Since the 1990s, some Western Tibetologists have started to rethink Tibet and criticize its idolization.

Most Tibetologists rely mainly on text studies. However, nowadays the textual study is no longer enough. As a student of anthropology, I hope I can contribute anthropological thought and methodology to the study of Tibet and offer an outsider's perspective. Tibet is an actual society rather than a Shangri-La, and Tibetan people are actual human beings rather than people of Buddha. In this thesis, I try to explore the Tibetan culture in an anthropological way mainly based on literature review and participant observation.

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Chapter I. Introduction: Circumambulation in Anthropology and Tibetan Society

This thesis offers an ethnographic account of the rituals of circumambulation and its patterns in Tibetan society. It has been well recognized that religion is one of the most important elements of Tibetan culture. The development of religions in Tibet has significantly influenced its history, and just as religious philosophy shapes Tibetans' behavior, vice versa the behavior can express Tibetans' thoughts. Circumambulation is also a prevalent ritual in many other religions or cultures. A study of one specific ritual, therefore, provides us with the means of understanding and interpreting the relation between behavior and thought structure in a given society.

As a Han Chinese and non-Tibetan Buddhist, I probably never will be able to comprehend the meaning and the significance of circumambulation as Tibetans do themselves, my interest in this subject is rooted in my curiosity from my undergraduate studies. In 2006, I made an important life decision: to study anthropology, which is a "minority major" in China, at a university for ethnic minorities. In this university, I saw members of ethnic groups with my own eyes rather than on television. Many of them have become my friends. I still can remember the first time I saw a Tibetan student rotating his prayer wheel. I asked him why Tibetans do this, and he answered that it is a custom. I was not satisfied with his answer and kept this question in mind. After taking a course about Tibetan culture and visiting some Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, I became increasingly interested in Tibet and its culture, and so I decided on Tibet as my research area. For my graduation paper, I wrote an ethnographic account of a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in my hometown, Xi'an. As anthropology is an exotic major in China, I continued my anthropological exploration in Canada after graduation

in 2011 with the Master of Arts in Anthropology program at the University of Alberta. As a thesis topic, I initially chose the Tibetan traditional painting—*thangka*[1] (*tangka*[2])—but I could not continue because of technical difficulties. Suddenly, the scene of the Tibetan student rotating the prayer wheel came back to mind, and I decided to answer my previous question myself.

After one year of study, I began to think rotating the prayer wheels is similar to circumambulation to some extent—circular movement around the sacred center. Thus I wanted to learn the reason that Tibetans prefer circumambulation as their method to practice both daily prayer and pilgrimages, and how they regard places or objects as sacred. It is important to study a particular culture from the ordinary peoples' lives, not just from literary or historical texts, so I went to Tibet for my fieldwork in the summer of 2012. Due to my limited time and budget, I could not stay for a year or more, as is customary in anthropological fieldwork. Therefore, I selected three representative locations—Lhasa, Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar—to study circumambulation. During my one month of fieldwork in Tibet, I talked with Tibetan people, went on the pilgrimage to the sacred mountain and lake, and did the circumambulation myself, experiencing it with my body and mind.

Circumambulation in Anthropological Discourse

The term circumambulate comes from the Latin *circum* 'circle' and *ambulare* 'to walk'; it especially means 'to circle on foot ritualistically' (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary). It is

[1] Scroll of painting in Tibet.
[2] Because it is difficult in many cases for nonspecialists to pronounce Tibetan words, I have used the simple phonetic equivalents from the website of The Tibetan & Himalayan Library after their proper spelling when they first appear in this thesis. See also an appendix after the main body of thesis.

a common ritual that can be seen in the major historical religions—Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism. It could be a "communal act of celebration of a particular deity" or a "solitary or more solemn pilgrimage" (Larson 2010: 153), the latter best corresponds with the individual self-cultivation I observed in Tibet. There is no specific anthropological theory or paradigm that focuses especially on circumambulation, but it can be analyzed through the lenses of many subfields of cultural anthropology, including economic anthropology, the anthropology of tourism, the anthropology of religion and so on. As the definition of circumambulation implies, abstractly it consists of two core elements: circular movement and a sacred center. In this thesis, I aim to analyze and explain circumambulation in the Tibetan context, drawing from anthropological discourse on pilgrimage, sacredness, and movement.

Pilgrimage

What is pilgrimage? Scholars from different disciplines have considered pilgrimage from various perspectives; however, there is no generally accepted definition. Human geographer Robert H. Stoddard argues that a standardized definition of pilgrimage is "essential for linguistic communication because the very basis of language involves the grouping of individual elements into semantic categories" (Stoddard 1997: 42). By comparative analysis of other scholars' definitions, Stoddard extracts four elements of pilgrimage—distance of movement, motivation, destination and magnitude—and thus gives his operational definition: "an event consisting of longer than local journeys by numerous persons to a sacred places and an act of religious devotion" (Stoddard 1997: 49).

Generally, the whole process of a pilgrimage should include preparation, a journey to a sacred place, prayer, and the aftermath of the pilgrimage. Circumambulation usually is part of

prayer—walking all the way around the sacred place or sacred objects to pray or express worship, such as Muslims' circumambulation of the Kaaba after their journey to Mecca. Therefore, in cultures in which circumambulation is considered a part of pilgrimage, it can be addressed under the anthropological perspective of pilgrimage to some extent.

Anthropological theories of pilgrimage draw heavily on Arnold van Gennep's well-known work *The Rites of Passage* and Victory Turner's symbolic interpretation of pilgrimage, which developed van Gennep's theory of the rites of passage. Van Gennep found a pattern of rites "accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another" (van Gennep 1960: 10) and named them rites of passage, then subdivided them into three categories: rites of separation (preliminal rites), transition rites (liminal rites), and rites of incorporation (postliminal rites). There are then three phases of rites of passage: separation, limen or margin, and aggregation. In the first phase, the ritual subject detaches from the previous stable state by performing symbolic behavior; then the ritual subject's state converts into an ambiguous state, "betwixt and between all familiar lines of classification" (Turner and Turner 1978: 2) during the second phase; in the third phase, the ritual subject returns to a stable state again, but with new status. Van Gennep's theory is a classical anthropological method to analyze the rites of passage including funerals, marriage, adolescence ceremonies and so forth. As for pilgrimage, he mentioned that the pilgrim could be incorporated into the sacred world from the secular world by the preliminal rite before the departure to pilgrimage, and then the pilgrim is "outside the ordinary life and in a transitional state until the return" (van Gennep 1960: 184-185). As the first scholar to raise the concept of rites of passage, van Gennep did not describe all the kinds of rite of passage or focus on all the stages of it in his book; however, he created a new way to study the process of rituals. In some cultures,

circumambulation can be regarded as a rite of passage, for example, a Chinese pilgrim who has circumambulated the Kaaba in Mecca could get a new status (Zhou and Yang 2007: 14).

Victor Turner developed van Gennep's theory and extended the concept of the liminal phase and focused on pilgrimages particularly. He considered pilgrimage as a liminoid ritual, as Turner summarized:

> Pilgrimage, then has some of the attributes of liminality in passage rites: release from mundane structure; homogenization of status; simplicity of dress and behavior; communitas; ordeal; reflection on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values; ritualized enactment of correspondences between religious paradigms and shared human experiences; emergence of the integral person from multiple personae; movement from a mundane center to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the individual, an axis mundi of his faith; movement itself, a symbol of communitas, which changes the time, as against stasis, which represents structure; individuality posed against the institutionalized milieu; and so forth. But since it is voluntary, not an obligatory social mechanism to mark the transition of an individual or group from one state or status to another within the mundane sphere, pilgrimage is perhaps best thought of as "liminoid" or "quasi-liminal", rather than "liminal" in Van Gennep's full sense. (Turner and Turner 1978: 34-35)

A significant aspect of liminality is its capability to generate communitas "a relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion" with other people, "which combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity, and comradeship" (Turner and Turner

1978: 250). However, Turner considers pilgrimage without its particular context and regards it as an autonomous entity existing outside of the rest of society. Many other ethnographic accounts from varied cultures challenge Turner's approach by showing that experiences of communitas are largely absent from specific pilgrimages (Badone and Roseman 2004: 4). In Tibetan society, which has special concepts of time and space, some parts of Turner's theory may not be applicable. Buffetrille finds that the quality of communitas is generally not present in Tibetan society, as differences in social status persist during the pilgrimage (Buffetrille 2004: 2), and to some Tantric practitioners, the pilgrimage is a highly individualistic practice to establish relationships with their own particular deities, rather than the group event emphasized by Turner.

Although Buddhism has significantly influenced Tibet, there is no specific term for pilgrimage in Buddhism; one reason for this is that the idea of emptiness or void "implies undifferentiated space and is thus deconstructive of sacred geography" (Naquin and Yü: 1992: 5). In a Tibetan context, the basic concepts of what a "pilgrimage" is do not correspond well with the definition of that word in English as 'a journey to a sacred place'. Nor do they correspond entirely with the Sanskrit terms *pradakshina* 'moving clockwise' or *yatra* 'journey'. In Tibetan, the term for pilgrimage is *gnas skor* (*né kor*), meaning 'going around a *gnas*' and *gnas mjal* (*né jel*) 'to encounter or meet a *gnas*' (Huber 1993: 19). The word *gnas* refers to sacred objects including places, people, and so on, as I will discuss in the following section. In this sense, the English terms "circumambulation" or "pilgrimatic circumambulation" correspond better with the Tibetan meaning of pilgrimage.

Sacredness

From the perspective of sacredness, a pilgrimage is a journey in a specific way to a specific place during a specific time. For example, in Islam, the *Hajj* pilgrimage refers to "observance of specified places in or near Mecca in Arabia, at a specified time" (Al Naqar 1972: xv, cited in Bhardwaj 1997: 2). If Muslims perform a journey to places other than Mecca or at different time then, it is not the *Hajj*. Here, the words "specific" or "specified" could refer to sacred. With regard to circumambulation, it is a circular movement around the sacred objects including space, buildings, people, things, and landscape during a sacred time. We can analyze the sanctity from two perspectives: sacred objects and sacred time. As Paul Larson said:

> In the act of marking off a space through physically walking its circumference, humans create a boundary between the sacred and the profane or mundane aspects of their world. In the course of the journey of circumscribing a space, the person or group exists in sacred time. (Larson 2010: 153)

In terms of the sacredness of objects, there is not a sharp boundary between "sacred" and "non-sacred". In order to rate the sanctity, scholars have employed several methods, such as: (1) statements in sacred texts, places mentioned as sacred in indigenous literature being accepted as sacred places of pilgrimage (Salomon 1979, cited in Stoddard 1997: 47); (2) empirical data that pertain to number of pilgrims or to distance traveled, a larger number of pilgrims or longer distance of travel indicating the higher sacredness (Stoddard 1997: 47); and (3) opinions of pilgrims, measuring the sacredness based on emic knowledge (Stoddard 1997: 47). However, sacredness is not an easy element to analyze quantitatively. All methods mentioned above have their deficiencies: (1) sacred texts do not explain the emergence of

new sacred places, and this method cannot be employed in societies without written language; (2) data pertaining to pilgrim numbers is circular reasoning, namely in that, a place is considered sacred because pilgrims go there and the reason pilgrims go to there is because it is sacred (Stoddard 1997: 47); (3) some pilgrims do not quite know the reason for a thing's sacredness or can only give simple answers, so if we rely only on these answers, we cannot make in-depth interpretations.

Sacredness is a factor that attracts pilgrims. Scholars use the term "magnitude" or "spiritual magnetism" to define this factor. James Preston uses the term "spiritual magnetism" to explain "the power of a pilgrimage shrine to attract devotees" (Preston 1992: 33), and argues that "places of pilgrimage are endowed with spiritual magnetism by association with: (1) miraculous cures, (2) apparitions of supernatural beings, (3) sacred geography, and (4) difficulty of access" (Preston 1992: 33). However, this one-dimensional term only gives the reason for attraction and is deficient in explaining how it affects pilgrims' behavior. Preston attempts to create a methodology to study sacredness of pilgrimage by this term, but the elements of this "spiritual magnetism" are too generalized or too limited to be employed well in particular cases such as circumambulatory pilgrimage in Tibet. Therefore, I prefer to use the term "sacred gravity" to explain the sacredness that attracts people to circumambulate in the Tibetan context, as I will explain in Chapter V.

I am not going to discuss how to measure the absolute degree of sacredness of objects in this thesis; I consider sacredness to be a relative concept, meaningful to different people in different cases, making it impossible to measure quantitatively. My aim in discussing the Tibetan case is to discuss what sacredness is in Tibet, the relative relationships between

sacred objects and pilgrims, and how sacred objects attract people and how pilgrims worship them.

Eliade argues that sacredness "manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane" and uses the term "hierophany" to indicate "something sacred shows itself to us" (Eliade 1959: 11). However, this sacredness needs to be understood in its own cultural milieu. He expresses this hierophany by an example of stone:

> By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu. A sacred stone remains a stone; apparently (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality. In other words, for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. (Eliade 1959: 12)

So what is sacredness, and how it is expressed in the Tibetan milieu? Toni Huber discusses this in detail in his doctoral dissertation *What Is a Mountain* (Huber 1993). Tibetans believe that the *bla* (*la*), 'the vitality' or 'life-power' exists everywhere in the world, including both person and place, and where this *bla* exists it is called *gnas.* So the *gnas* is not only restricted as a sacred place, but the *gnas* could be any sacred object such as a person, mountain, lake, stone, etc. (Huber 1993: 14-16). The *gnas* expresses the internal sacredness of *bla* by an external form. In addition, there is no specific term for a pilgrimage center as distinct from a shine, monastery, sanctuary, or church in English (Naquin and Yü: 1992: 3), and in Tibet, the term *gnas* also has the meaning of 'center' or 'centrality'.

In terms of sacred time, there are two aspects of it that must be considered: when does sacred time occur and how is time conceived of? Eliade argues that sacred time is "a primordial mythical time made present" (Eliade 1959: 68). Therefore, sacred time is usually connected with the saints and important events, such as birth-dates of religious leaders and the date of the foundation of the religion. Sacred time can make a normal place become sacred and make a sacred place become more sacred. For example, in China, some people burn paper money for their dead relatives during the Qing Ming Festival to memorialize them; at this time, the places where they burn paper money become sacred. In the Year of the Horse in the Tibetan calendar, Mount Kailash becomes more sacred, and thus people can gain 13 times the usual merit[3] by circumambulating it.

The concept of time varies in different cultures; roughly, these concepts can be divided into two categories—linear time and circular or cyclical time. Linear time is a concept in which time is conceived of as a line from start to end; the Bible, for instance, proposes that time exists from the creation of the world to a final apocalypse. However, in some cultures, time is prevalently described in circular terms, for instance as a wheel which is turning forever without end, as in both Mayan tradition and Hinduism. In Tibetan Buddhism, the term "*khor ba*" (*kor wa*), a translation of the Sanskrit term "*samsara*", refers to the wheel of birth and rebirth. Tibetans accumulate merit through Buddhist practice to wish for better living conditions in the next life. In this way, circumambulation is a ritual that fits their concept of time perfectly, and it indicates that concept ritually in a material form.

[3] One essential concept in Buddhism (the Sanskrit term is *punya*), people can gain merits by doing good deeds and thus be reborn in a different position of samsara 'the wheel of life' in the next life or gain liberation to escape from samsara.

Movement

No matter the religion or the terminology used to describe a religious journey, there is one aspect that applies to all types of pilgrimage, namely, the physical movement from home to the sacred place (Bhardwaj 1997: 2). In the course of my literature review, an anthropological perspective from a walking study enlightened me. It focuses on the walking itself and tries to explain the diversity of walking practices in the places where anthropologists and others work (Vergunst and Ingold 2008: xi). The representative scholar is Tim Ingold, who states it is rare to find ethnography that reflects on walking itself and asserts a way of walking does not merely express thoughts and feelings that have already been imparted through an education in cultural precepts and proprieties. It is itself a way of thinking and of feeling, through which, in the practice of pedestrian movement, these cultural forms are continually generated (Ingold 2008: 2-3). This provides a good way to think about circumambulation, abstracting the circumambulation from its function in ritual, and hence concentrating on itself as a way of walking or movement. By this means, it offers a universal perspective for thinking about circumambulations of different cultures.

Throughout the Tibetan language, *agro* (*adro*) 'going' is an important concept and the root of many words. In Tibetan, the concept of being is linked with going:

> A living being is a *aGro Ba* [*adro ba*] ("go one") or, in the aggregate, *aGro Ba Rigs Drug* [*adro ba rik druk*] ("six classes of goers"). Buddha is called *aGro Bai Bla Ma* [*adro bai la ma*] ("high one of the goers"), and Avalokitesvara is known as *aGro Bai mGon Po* [*adro bai gön po*] ("lord of the goers"). Man is variously called *aGro Ba Rin Chen* [*adro ba rin chen*] ("great-value goers"), *aGro mCHog* [*adro chok*] ("perfect goers"), or *Langs aGro* [*lang adro*] ("erect goer"). Animals are *Dud*

> *aGro* [*dü adro*] ("stooping goer"); birds are *PHur aGro* [*pur adro*] ("flying goer"); frogs are *mCHong aGro* [*chong adro*] ("jumping goer"); fish are *rKyal aGro* [*kyel adro*] ("swimming goer"); worms are *NYal aGro* [*nyel adro*] ("lying-down goer"); and snakes are *lTo aGro* [*to adro*] ("belly goer"). The fairies, or dakini, of the sky, about whom the Tibetans learned from the Hindus, are not characterized as living in the sky but, in accordance with one of their attributes, as *mKhaa aGro Ma* [*kha adro ma*] ("sky-going females"). (Ekvall 1964: 228-229)

This linguistic evidence indicates the importance of walking in Tibetan culture and provides a clue as to why Tibetans prefer circumambulation—to gain liberation by walking.

The way one walks is affected by one's environment. In his *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Ingold states that movement is "a mechanical displacement of human body across the surface of the earth, from one point to another, and that knowledge is assembled from observations taken from these points" (Ingold 2011: 17). In this perspective, the particular culture can interact with its way of walking or movement of people. Ingold uses a comparison between European and Japanese dance to show this interaction:

> Whereas the European, as I have already observed, walks from the hips while keeping the legs as straight as possible, Japanese people traditionally walked from the knees while minimizing movement at the hips […] European dancers aspire to verticality, using their feet like stilts, a posture taken to its most stylized extreme in classical ballet where the female dancer balances on the tips of her toes, arm stretched heavenwards, while her male partner, with his leaps and bounds,

> temporarily loses contact with the ground altogether. Japanese dancers, by contrast, through flexible movement of the knees, drag their feet across the smooth floor in a shuffling motion, without ever lifting their heels. (Ingold 2011: 40)

The particular style of Japanese dance comes from a particular style of walking, and a particular environment affects the walking style. Walking from the knees is very effective on rough or hilly terrain in Japan because the lower center gravity reduces the risk of tripping and falling; in addition, the method of carrying heavy loads suspended from a long, supple pole resting athwart the shoulders makes this form of walking very ergonomic (Ingold 2011: 40). In the case of Tibet, due to the deficiency of oxygen and low temperature caused by high altitude, Tibetans' energy consumption is higher than people who live in low-lying areas, and that is also the reason they prefer high-calorie foods like yak butter. In terms of walking, their pace is comparatively slower than people who live in low-altitude areas, though it is still much faster than travelers in Tibet. When walking in mountainous areas, the axiom that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line is usually inapplicable. If you insist on walking straight then, you would never arrive at your destination because of obstacles, or it would cost you much more time and energy. Since it is almost impossible to walk directly across, the roughly circular shapes of mountains and lakes force people to walk around; in religious context, this becomes circumambulation.

In addition, this circular way of movement is compatible with the Buddhist philosophy of samsara, which considers life to be the cycle of death and rebirth, in which people are reborn in six different realms depending on their karma from previous lives. Circumambulation symbolizes this outlook on life, namely endless circles without start and end.

Essential Concepts of Tibetan History and Religions

To understand Tibetan culture, we cannot separate it from religion, which has permeated almost every aspect of Tibetan culture: literature, art, architecture, and Tibetan people's daily life. Looking through the history of Tibet, we can find it is a history of religions to some extent. Similarly, Tibetan history has been passed down orally or through written works by religious practitioners because of their monopoly on knowledge and education, especially after the 7th century AD when Buddhism came into Tibet and gradually gained dominance. Therefore, Tibetan historical texts have a strong Buddhist tendency and inflection. It is hard to find what facts are in Tibetan history, this would require extensive textural research which is beyond the scope of this thesis. I do not intend to give the whole history of Tibet here. Instead, I will give some essential concepts to help understand the topic of my thesis.

Religious Traditions before Buddhism

Written Tibetan history can be traced back to the 7th century following the invention of the Tibetan alphabet during the period of the Tibetan Empire (Tsering 2007: 52-54). However, the written history of ancient Tibetan is filled with much mythological and religious doctrine, and Tibetan archaeology is still a relatively new topic in China, making it difficult to get an accurate history of ancient Tibet before the 7th century. From other references from Chinese, Tibetan, and Indian sources, scholars have suggested that the development of the Tibetan state may have begun with some small pastoral tribes (McKay 2003: 18), that then formed a centralized “state” named Zhang Zhuang located in the northwest of the Tibetan Plateau with the territory including almost the whole of Tibet in the period prior to the formation of the Tibetan Empire in the 7th century (Tsering 2007: 21-23). Zhang Zhuang was more like a tribal confederacy without fixed political and administrative centers than a state in modern

Western understanding. It is also the place where the indigenous religion in Tibet, Bon, originated (McKay 2003: 18).

Bon was the prevalent religious tradition in Tibet before Tibetan Buddhism. There are still many debates on its origin and early history due to a lack of written records. According to Bon sources, a mystical figure, Shenrab Miwoche, who was the prince of Zhang Zhuang, founded it in a place called Tagzig Olmo Lung Ring, which could refer to parts of the wider Persian Empire. However, the earliest surviving documents indicate Bon as a religion only dates from the 9th or 10th century AD (Powers &Templeman 2012: 100). Literally, the word "*bon*" (*bön*) means 'chant repeatedly' (Tsering 1996: 67); the term "Bon" can refer to three distinct traditions in the context of Western scholarship according to Per Kværne: (1) the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet related to the worship of sacred and supernatural kings, which is essentially distinct from Buddhism; (2) a religion that appeared in Tibet in the 10th and 11th centuries that has significant similarities to Buddhism with regard to doctrine and practice; or (3) a vast variety of popular beliefs including divination, the cult of local deities and concepts of the soul (Kværne 1995: 9-10).

Following the rising of a tribe in the Yarlung River Valley in South Tibet, a powerful state was founded around the 6th century, namely the Tibetan Empire (Tsering 2007: 44-59). Following Tibetan tradition, there are 42 kings of the Tibetan Empire, the earliest 27 kings had a close relationship with Bon and governed the empire through its power in religious respects (Haarh 2003: 144; Wang 1987: 1-2). But this situation changed following the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet.

The Conflict between Bon and Buddhism

Songtsan Gampo, the thirty-third king of the Tibetan Empire, introduced Buddhism from India and China to Tibet by his marriage with Nepalese Princess Bhrikuti and Chinese Princess Wen Cheng (Huang 2010: 17-23). In addition, the written form of the Tibetan language was created during his reign and he requested monks from India, China, Nepal and Kashmir to translate the Buddhist texts into Tibetan (Huang 2010: 24-30). These two events established the foundation for the formation and propagation of Tibetan Buddhism, and also led to the struggle between Bon and Buddhism.

During this conflict, although they clashed with each other, they meanwhile absorbed each other's quintessence. When Buddhism was first introduced into Tibet, Bon was dominant in Tibetan society. To encourage its acceptance, Buddhism borrowed many things from Bon and transferred them into Buddhist practice. For example, Buddhism absorbed the concept of mountain deities and converted them into the protective deities of Buddhism (Tsering 2008: 65). In the late 8th century, however, King Trisong Detson greatly supported Buddhism and in the meantime eradicated Bon; thus Bon started to wane (Shakbpa 2010: 130-133). In order to revive, Bon began to learn from Buddhism. In the 9th century, Buddhism also faced a catastrophe of its own: King Langdarma started to support Bon and eradicated Buddhism. His anti-Buddhist activities led to the waning of Buddhism, finally leading to his being assassinated by a Buddhist monk (Shakbpa 2010: 162-163). Following this, the Tibetan Empire collapsed and stepped into the so-called Era of Fragmentation (842-1264).

This period gave both Bon and Buddhism the opportunity to revive. From the 10th to the 11th centuries, with the discovery of the *gter ma* (*ter ma*) 'hidden treasures', which were believed to be textual classics buried by saints previously to protect them from disaster, Bon was

restored and gradually formed its theoretical system. In the meanwhile, Buddhism was reintroduced from Amdo and Nagri to central Tibet and its restoration began with the development of Vinaya and the gradual formation of the sects of Tibetan Buddhism (Tsering 2008: 64-66). After this period, Tibetan Buddhism became the dominant religion, having a great effect on politics. Although Bon survived, it utterly lost its religious dominance. Therefore practitioners of Bon retained an implacable hatred for Buddhism, which was expressed in the reversal of Buddhist custom, such as circumambulation and prayer wheels rotation being performed in a counter-clockwise direction (Kværne 2003: 474).

Tibetan Buddhism

In the history of Buddhism, a first schism in the Sangha[4] happened after the nirvana of Buddha between the Sthaviravada[5] and Mahasangha[6]. Sthviravada gradually developed into Hinayana or 'Lesser Vehicle' schools, primarily represented today by Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, its central goal being nirvana or freedom from samsara, the cycle of rebirth. Mahasangha gradually developed into Mahayana Buddhism or 'Great Vehicle' schools, represented today throughout China, Tibet, and East Asia. It emphasizes the veneration of Bodhisattvas, humans who had achieved Buddhahood but refused to enter nirvana until they had saved all other sentient beings. In the later phase of development of Mahayana Buddhism, it absorbed many Tantric doctrines and practices including mantra, yoga, magic ritual, and techniques of meditation, thus forming the Vajrayana Buddhism, also named Tantric Buddhism (Skilton 1997: 135), represented today in Tibet, Nepal, Japan, and Indonesia. Since its doctrine is significantly symbolic and virtually unintelligible without teaching and commentary from a guru, this tradition is also known as Esoteric Buddhism compared to previous Mahayana doctrine.

[4] The Buddhist community of monks and nuns.
[5] One school of early Buddhism, literally means "teaching of elders".
[6] One school of early Buddhism, literally means "great sangha".

Tibetan Buddhism is primarily derived from India, consisting of the philosophy of Mahayana, ritual practice of Vajrayana and the traditional beliefs of Bon, which are its three core elements. Due to its significant difference from traditional Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism used to be called Lamaism or "Civilized Shamanism" (Samuel 1993, cited in Shen 2010: 47). Besides the study of Buddhist theories and classics like other traditions of Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism has innumerable Tantric ritual practices. Following White's definition:

> Tantra is that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience in nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways. (White 2000: 9)

Tibetan Buddhists employ techniques for personal spiritual cultivation as the one path to Buddhahood. These practices, including rituals, meditations, and yoga, are quite elaborate and esoteric. Tantric practices are considered as the fastest and most convenient way of cultivation to achieve Buddhahood. Traditionally, only when the practitioners finished the study of Mahayana dharma are they allowed to study the Tantric practices under the mentorship of gurus. As for laymen believers, it is difficult to attain the authentic Tantric practices. However, as the Tibetan diaspora spread Tibetan Buddhism worldwide, the prerequisites for Tantric practices have lowered in order to suit Western practitioners, and they are now much more accessible for common people.

Currently, Tibetan Buddhism has four main sects, schools, orders, or traditions: Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Geluk. It is usual to add the word "*pa*" (*pa*) or "*ba*" (*ba*) to these to refer to practitioners of these sects in English. Throughout history, all these sects or their

tributaries dominated Tibet both religiously and politically, except Nyingmapa. Eventually, Gelukpa gained power in Tibet with the military help of the Mongols in 1642, and their head, the Dalai Lama, became the ecclesiocratic leader of Tibet (Wang 1987: 178-182). Gelukpa kept its dominance, and in 1959 the 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet to establish the Tibetan Government in Exile in the Indian city of Dharamsala.

Reincarnation

Reincarnation is an important concept in Tibetan Buddhism and cultures. Its theoretical foundations are animism from Bon and samsara from Buddhism (Chen 2008: 31). It is believed that life consists of body and soul, and when the current body dies, the soul will be reincarnated in a new body through the state known as *bardo* (*bardo*) 'intermediate state'. Depending on one's karma, one will be reborn in different forms, namely the six realms in the circle of rebirth. This concept of the soul is different from the Western philosophy; John Blofeld describes the difference as follows:

> This belief is too alien to the Western tradition to be easily acceptable by the heirs of a Christian or Moslem culture, but it is something that is taken for granted by about half the human race, for Hindus, Taoists and other besides Buddhists, subscribe to it. Though impossible to verify, it is not illogical. There is less logic in the theistic belief which postulates an infinite extension of life in the future for beings who had a finite origin, for it is reasonable to suppose that what had a beginning must have an end. Everything observable (matter and energy) is subject to change but never to creation out of nothing nor to total extinction, and it seems more likely than not that the same laws apply to what is not observable. Incidentally, acceptance of the doctrine of rebirth makes it easy to arrive at

> tentative explanations of many problems insoluble in terms of environment or heredity. (Blofeld 1992: 56)

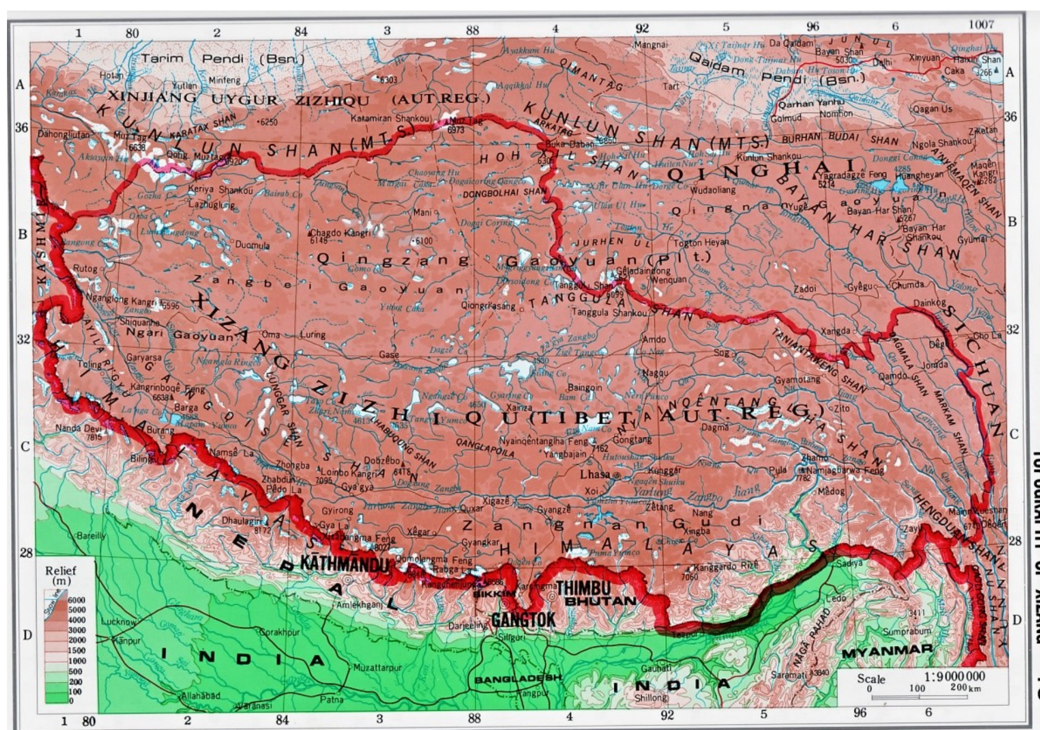
In the development of Tibet Buddhism, each sect faced the problem of choosing an heir to inherit dharma and power. Some sects adopted the method of blood relationship, like Sakyapa. In the 13th century, one tributary of Kagyu, Karma Kagyu, first created the system of inheritance through reincarnation. Following this, all other sects except Sakyapa gradually adopted it (Norbu 1992: 72). The reincarnated Tibetan Buddhist practitioner is known as *tulku* (*tuku*) 'reincarnation', or *huo fo* 'living Buddha' in Chinese. When one *tulku* dies, a child is chosen as that person's reincarnation following prophecies and tests. After years of education, this child becomes the new leader and the lineage continues in this way.

In practical terms, reincarnation is a way to continue power and maintain a political balance. However, it is also the means by which Tibetan Buddhism carries out a circular philosophy. High level practitioners can circulate and inherit their powers and memories by reincarnation; laymen, however, collect merit to gain good rebirth in samsara through circumambulation and spinning prayer wheels, which are symbolic and physical metaphors for reincarnation in my opinion. Philosophically, circumambulation shares this concept, but it is performed in a different way which I will discuss in the following chapters.

Tibetan Society and Circumambulation

Tibet, or *bod* (*bö*) in Tibetan, is located in the Tibetan Plateau to the northeast of the Himalayas. Scholars thought the term "Tibet" either derived from the Tibetan term *stod bod* (*tö bö*) for 'upper Tibet' or from the early Indian name *bhot* for 'Tibet' (French 2010: 2). It is

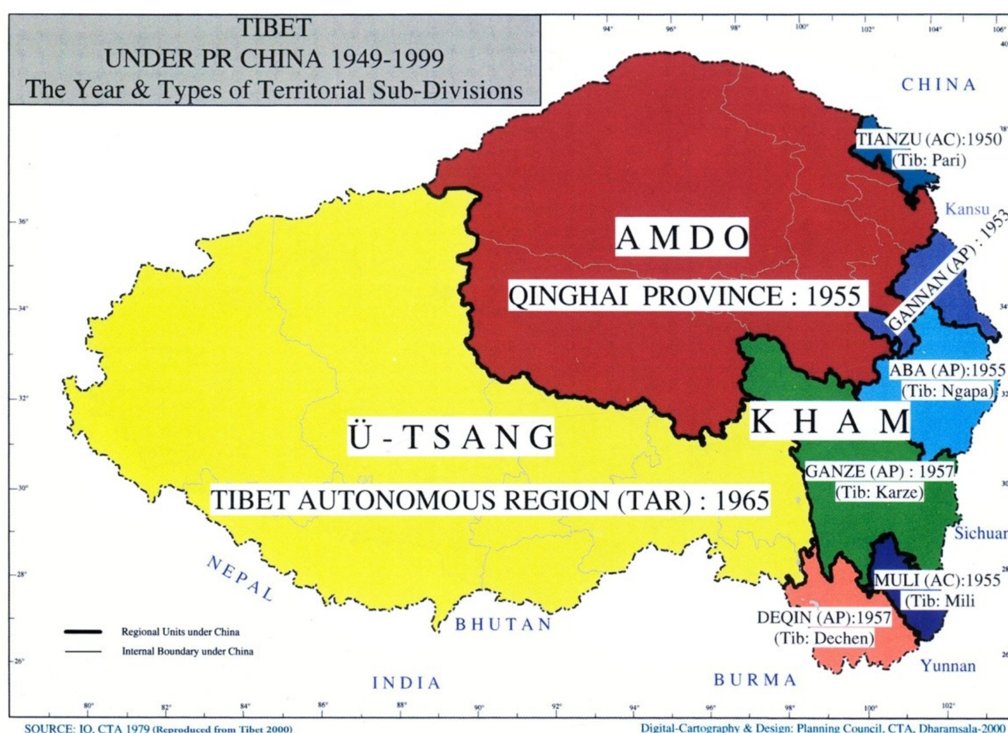
the highest region on Earth, with an elevation of 5,000 meters above sea level, on average. If imagining Tibet like a clock, from its twelve o'clock position, it is surrounded by enormous mountain masses clockwise: the Kunlun Mountains, Tanggula Mountains, Bayan Har Mountains, Hengduan Mountains, and Himalayas. The climate of Tibet is generally dry and cool because the Himalayas block the wet monsoon from the south, and the high elevation results in low temperatures. The Tibetan Plateau is the sources of the main rivers in China, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, including the Yellow River, Yangtze River, Mekong, Salween River, Brahmaputra River, and Indus River.



Map 1. Topography of Tibet. Source: China Tourist Maps.

As an influential civilization in Central Asia, Tibet has acculturated its neighboring areas through Tibetan Buddhism. In China, the traditional Tibetan cultural area or Greater Tibet as claimed by the Tibetan Government in Exile is the area including Ü-Tsang, Amdo and Kham, which are the present-day Tibet Autonomous Region, Qinghai Province, two Tibetan

Autonomous Prefectures of Aba and Ganze and a Tibetan Autonomous County, Muli in Sichuan Province, a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gannan and a Tibetan Autonomous County, Tianzu in Gansu Province, and a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Deqin in Yunnan Province. The total area of Greater Tibet is 2.5 million square kilometers. However, according to information offered by the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, the total area of Tibet is only the area of the Tibet Autonomous Region, which is 1.2022 million square kilometers (official website of Central Tibetan Administration). This is to say that the Chinese government does not accept the concept of Greater Tibet.



Map 2. Map of Greater Tibet. Source: Central Tibetan Administration.

According to the statistical data of the 2010 China Population Census, the population of the Tibetan people is 6,282,187 in the People's Republic of China, and among them there are 2,716,388 in the Tibet Autonomous Region (Department of Population 2010). Besides that,

there is a Tibetan diaspora around the world. Tibetans speak the Tibetan language, which belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family and includes three main dialects: Ü-Tsang Tibetan (Central Tibetan), Amdo Tibetan, and Khams Tibetan (Yang 2003: 197). With the policy of generalization of standard Chinese (*pu tong hua*) in China and the ethnic policy, the official languages in the Tibet Autonomous Region, autonomous prefectures, and autonomous counties are Tibetan and standard Chinese. In my fieldwork, I found that most Tibetan officers and businessmen in cities and towns can speak standard Chinese in order to work or for business. However, most Han Chinese cannot speak Tibetan or can only speak several simple words and sentences, although policy requires that officers who work in Tibet must learn Tibetan. In rural mountain and pasturing areas, indigenous people can only speak Tibetan and some simple Chinese words.

The traditional livelihood of Tibet is herding and agriculture (Yang 2003: 204). The most important livestock is the yak. Tibetans have domesticated yaks for their every part. Their meat can be eaten; yak butter is used for making the most popular Tibetan beverage, yak butter tea, and for butter flower sculptures and monastery offerings, where it is used as lamp fuel; yak hides are used for making felts; the feces are used for fuel and for cleaning bowls; the skeleton is used for making talismans. The high altitude has an excellent carrying capacity for this animal. Hulless barley is the main crop in Tibet, which is used for cooking *tsampa* (*tsampa*) — the main food of Tibetans—a mixture of stirred hulless barley with yak butter tea (Yang 2003: 209). It is easily preserved and easy to make; with *tsampa* and yaks, Tibetans can make long-distance journeys. Although the yak's usage as transportation has decreased with the spread of vehicles, it is still irreplaceable in mountain areas.

The Tibetan people, or as they called themselves, *bodpa* (*bö pa*), which means 'the people of Tibet', are the native ethnic group in Tibet. In terms of their origin, there are at least ten

scholarly hypotheses, including origins in India and Iran (Gele 1988: 44). Although no consensus has yet been reached, it is generally agreed that ancient humans immigrated to the Tibetan Plateau from other places. Archaeological evidence has proved that human beings have resided in Tibet since the Upper Paleolithic (Huo 2010: 59), and recent molecular biological evidence confirms that "the majority of Tibetan matrilineal components can trace their ancestry to Epipaleolithic and Neolithic immigrants from northern China during the mid-Holocene" (Zhao 2009: 21230).

As previously mentioned, the main religious beliefs in Tibet are Tibetan Buddhism and Bon. Generally, most Tibetans are pious believers, and religious practices fill up their life, although some young people have lost interest in religion. From the perspective of difficulty and walking distance, the longest and hardest one-way religious practice is pilgrimage to sacred places; however, the shorter and the easier one is circumambulation, which is more frequent and actually the longest in total. In Tibetan, circumambulation is called s*kor ra* (*kor ra*) or *bskor ba* (*korwa*) 'to go in a circuit', the "b" of *ba* usually disappears in most dialects, and so it is also often written as *bskor ra* (*kor ra*) (Ekvall 1964: 230); it also means the path for circumambulation (Larsen and Sinding-Larsen 2001: 46). One important thing to mention here is that unlike how the English word circumambulation emphasizes walking on foot, *bskor ba*, 'to go in a circuit' emphasizes circuitous motion rather than walking on foot. In fact, I observed Tibetans paid more attention to the circular shape of movement rather than the means of movement. Similarly, the Chinese words Tibetans use to express circumambulation *zhuan jin* 'go around script' and *zhuan fo* 'go around Buddha', *zhuan shan* 'go around mountain' or *zhuan hu* 'go around lake' depending on the different objects do not emphasize walking on foot. In addition, the word *bskor* (*kor*) is also used when one turns a wheel (Ekvall 1964: 230). For this reason, I argue that the rotation of prayer wheels can be

classified as circumambulation, or to be more exact, a related form of circuit going in the Tibetan context, as I will discuss in Chapter IV. However, the word circumambulation has become a convention in this area of research in the English literature, and so I will still use this term in this work.

For most other religious believers, pilgrimage is perhaps aspiration at best rather than an everyday religious practice, especially in the times before the popularization of modern transportation. Money to support the pilgrimage is not the only difficulty; pilgrims may face robbery, atrocious weather, starvation, and many unexpected events in their journey (Turner 1978: 7). Some Tibetans will convert all their assets to go to Lhasa, some even by begging; some never arrive at their destination. Death on the pilgrimage is also regarded as meritorious.

Unlike distance decay functions that apply to most regular human movement, in which the greater the distance travelled is, the harder the journey becomes, in the pilgrimages of some cultures, movement itself is a form of worship or sacrifice, the role of distance is no longer considered as an obstacle, and becomes merit instead (Stoddard and Morinis 1997: X). For Tibetans, travel to pilgrimage sites is the means of the pilgrimage instead of the aim. They can increase the merit of their pilgrimage by increasing the difficulty of the travel—for instance, by making the walking more challenging by repeatedly performing full body prostration. Even so, more and more people tend to travel by modern transportation.
In broader terms, circumambulation is not just a particular ritual within pilgrimages, but it also includes the circumambulatory practices of laymen in common life. Unlike the circumambulation in a pilgrimage, this form is more relaxed, and obviously less effective in accumulation of merit compared to that of a pilgrimage. However, as not everyone can be a pilgrim to Lhasa, pious Tibetans increase the benefits of circumambulation by means of

increasing the frequency, difficulty, and duration. People circumambulate sacred objects depending on their local situation, be it stupas, large prayer wheels, or monasteries, at least once per day. Simply walking is not enough; they each will rotate a portable prayer wheel, and in so doing perform a less difficult micro-circuit. They may also chant mantras while walking, or even do a full body prostration while circumambulating in order to maximize merit by increasing the difficulty of the act. In addition, some elders who do not need to work will rotate prayer wheels while chanting silently all day, except when eating and sleeping.

There are no accurate historical sources about the origin of circumambulation in Tibet. Ekvall argues that there was no circumambulation as a rite in Tibet before the introduction of Buddhism, and that it came to Tibet at that point (Ekvall 1964: 226-228). In terms of circumambulation in early Buddhism, Ekvall states that it began with the Buddha himself. In support of this interpretation, Ekvall quotes from Buddhist scriptures that mention circumambulation: "After he [the Buddha] had met the five ascetics, but before he began to preach to them, and as preliminary to turning the wheel of the doctrine, he circumambulated the three seats of the previous Buddhas and then sat in the fourth seat" (Ekvall 1964: 227). However, as Wylie observes, many ritual practices arose long after the death of the historical Buddha, and the ritual is more likely to have had a later origin (Wylie 1966: 42).
An anecdote from an 11th century biography of Atisa[7] mentions that Atisa performed aerial circumambulation in the Samye Monastery and he instructed his Tibetan disciples how to do circumambulation (Stoddard 1999: 176). In Tibetan texts, at the beginning of the 12th century, Milarepa's[8] disciple Gampopa invited Jikten Gonpo, and Lingrepa sent disciples to Mount Kailash to take retreat and meditate. One of these disciples, Gonpodorjie created the circumambulation path of Mount Kailash (Tsering 1996: 76). From these accounts, we may

[7] He is a famous Buddhist master from the Pala Empire in Bengal who spread Buddhist in Tibet in the 11th century.
[8] He is one of the main luminaries of the Kagyupa.

infer that circumambulation of Mount Kailash was practiced by the 12th century. In addition, circumambulatory pilgrimage seems testified to in the building of ambulatories around the cellae of temples, the initial construction of which can be traced back to the 7th—10th centuries (Buffetrille 1998: 19). The origins of this ritual are likely derived from Buddhism, but there is no solid evidence so far. Since this is archaeologically difficult to reveal, especially around a mountain or lake, more systematic textual studies are required to find the answer to this question.

Currently, circumambulation is the most widespread religious practice or custom in Tibet; people choose different scales of circumambulation depending on their various conditions and wishes. Similar to the Tibetan term for circumambulation *bskor ba* 'to go in a circuit', the Tibetan term for pilgrimage is called *gnas skor*, meaning 'to go around the sacred place' and a pilgrim is called *gnas skor ba* (*né kor ba*), meaning 'people who go around a sacred place' (Buffetrille 1998: 19). Tibetans also call pilgrimage *chao fo* in Chinese, literally meaning 'pilgrimage to Buddha or face to Buddha'. Therefore, in my opinion, for Tibetans pilgrimage involves undertaking a long-distance and large-scale circuit, rather than circumambulation being a mere part of pilgrimage. The further one must travel to the sacred place being circumambulated, the greater the merit and benefits. At its largest scale in Tibet, circuiting or circumambulation is done around sacred mountains and lakes; at its smallest scale circuiting is the rotation of prayer wheels.

Traditionally, circumambulation is done while walking or walking with prostrations. Ekvall also mentions two rare methods: on one's knees and creeping on one's belly (Ekvall 1964: 231). I did not see these methods when I was in Tibet; they might be exceptional, individual cases. However, with the development of society, some people may choose new ways to

perform circuits, like using vehicles or other substitutes. As Buffetrille observed at A myes rMa chen Mountain in Qinghai:

> By 1990, a short portion of the route was suitable for motor vehicles but, at that time there were no vehicles. Pilgrims on horseback, accompanied by their yaks, formed small caravans. By 2002, the road linked two entrances of the pilgrimage and a substantial number of pilgrims made the half circumambulation on motorcycles, with prayers flags hung on the handlebars; others, more well to do, were in cars. (Buffetrille 2004: 7)

The direction of circumambulation is also based on the natural circular movement of the sun. In the Vedas, the term sunwise means the direction of the Sun's movement—from east to west through the south—that is, clockwise. In Buddhism, the position when the object faces the south is called absolute position, which is the position in which to place statues or images of Buddha (Nakamura 1951: 351-352). Therefore, Simpson also argues that the clockwise rite of circumambulation originated in ideas and practices related to sun worship and the course of the sun (Simpson 1896: 83). In one story reported in a Tibetan Buddhist text, Milarepa was able to identify five female demons because they circumambulated in the opposite direction from the Buddhists.

> Fair maidens, seated to my left, you sisters, I must ask you questions. I have no other aim but to know if you are human beings or demonesses […] I saw you come like dazzling pearls upon a string… Are you *phra men dakinis* [*tra men dakinis*]? The Buddhist way of circumambulation is from left to right. But yours is the

> opposite way. Thus I know you are goddess-demons […] This demasks you as enchanteresses! (Stoddard 1999: 209)

Less provocatively, counter-clockwise circumambulations can be attributed to Bon practitioners. However, Huber argues that although the cliché "clockwise for Buddhists and counterclockwise for Bon practitioners" is followed in practice, it is not necessarily always the case. For example, Buddhists circumambulate counterclockwise at Mount Kongpo Bonri, and Bon practitioners circumambulate clockwise around Mount Tsari, while all women do half a circuit in each direction (Huber 1993: 19-21).

When talking about the function of circumambulation, common Tibetan pilgrims and most Western scholars always mention accumulating merit. However, this is, to some extent, a superficial and oversimplified explanation. Huber argues that in Tibetan tradition, the sacred objects or *gnas* have the *byin* (*jin*) 'empowerment' to purify the *sgrib* (*drip*), literally meaning 'shadow or stain'. This physical and mental pollution or defilement is related to substances and various actions, and to deities residing bodily and in the external world. For Tibetans, *sgrib* and *byin* are fundamental aspects of a Tibetan formulation of relationships between people, and between people and places, especially during pilgrimage (Huber 1993: 26-29). People circumambulate the sacred objects *gnas* to build a relationship with this empowerment *byin* in order to purify the defilement *sgrib*.

In terms of the objects of the circumambulation, Ekvall roughly classifies them into persons, images, scriptures, offerings, religious structures, topographical features, and noumenal projections achieved by meditation (Ekvall 1964: 236-244). In this thesis, I will discuss circumambulation in three categories from a natural and symbolic meaning, namely: (1)

natural landscapes which symbolize the whole world; (2) cities and monasteries as artificial structure contain persons, images, scriptures and offerings; and (3) rotating prayer wheels that abstractly symbolizes the core concept of all forms of circumambulation—circular movement around the sacred center.

Framework of Present Study

The study of Tibet, or Tibetology, is an interdisciplinary study referring to anything Tibetan, including history, religion, language, and so forth. Many disciplines contribute knowledge to Tibetology. However, as Western exploration of Tibet started with missionaries who wanted to spread Christianity, the earliest studies were of Tibetan language, followed by religious philosophy. Therefore, Tibetology has a philological tradition, and many Tibetologists are more interested in textual rather than field study. After 1951 China gained the actual administrative control of Tibet; it became a kind of "forbidden area", as it was closed to foreigners until the 1980s. After 1980, although Tibet has become "open" for foreigners, restrictions still hinder field study in Tibet: they cannot freely go everywhere in Tibet, and researchers and journalists are usually accompanied by officers of the government. The first foreign researcher entered Tibet after 1980 was American scholar Melvyn Goldstein, who went to Lhasa to collect linguistic data while compiling a dictionary in 1985. In addition, Chinese and Tibetan scholars cannot speak freely about their research areas. The result of this situation is that anthropological studies in Tibet are much less developed than other studies in Tibetology. However, some scholars have conducted anthropological research about other people who practice Tibetan Buddhism and about Tibetan exiles in other countries; for example, Sherry Ortner studied Sherpas in Nepal, and Geoffrey Samuel studied Tibetans in India and Nepal.

In terms of Tibetan circumambulation, after reviewing the English and Chinese literature, and literature translated into English and Chinese, I found that the first work to focus on Tibetan circumambulation itself is a chapter in Robert B. Ekvall's book *Religious Observances in Tibet: Patterns and Function* published in 1964. Ekvall was a seasoned military Professional Expert Interpreter of the US Army during World War II in the Pacific. He was in close contact and carefully communicated with Tibetans, especially in Amdo, during his more than eight-year mission in Asia. Based on his personal observations in Tibet and interviews with Tibetans including some high-ranking lamas back in the US, he wrote this book. In one chapter, Ekvall gives a detailed ethnographic description of circumambulation, including its origin, terminology, function, manner, and types. Although that chapter was written 50 years ago, we can compare what circumambulation was like before 1959, when China took over Tibet, to modern society. By reading his study, I found how Tibetans have kept the tradition and also how circumambulation has changed since that time.

In one chapter, Ekvall states that most references in his time only mentioned circumambulation briefly and dropped it; no one realized its importance in Tibetan culture (Ekvall 1964: 235). Although there are more descriptions of circumambulation nowadays, these still only consist of scattered descriptions instead of explorations of a particular interest in the subject, as far as I know. One exception is an article written by Charlene E. Makely that later became one chapter of her book (Makely 2007). Original and distinct in Makely's work is that she views circumambulation from a feminist perspective; she argues that there are gendered boundaries in motion expressed by circumambulation in Tibet. Tibetan village women are usually busy doing household chores while men gather to relax. However, women still outnumber men doing circumambulation. For women, circumambulation is "the most important avenue for empowered action aimed at self-improvement in a rapidly changing

world with few opportunities for women's social mobility and education" (Makely 2007: 174).

Although most academic literature which mentions circumambulation in Tibet is under the perspective of pilgrimage, pilgrimage itself is a relatively new topic in Tibetology, and much stimulus has been provided by the works of Victor Turner and his theoretical successors. Since the 1960s and 1970s, when some Indic scholars contributed pioneering work in Himalayan and Tibetan studies, pilgrimage has increasingly come into Tibetologists' view (McKay 1998: 3-4). Representative Western scholars in this research area are Alex McKay and Toni Huber. Alex McKay graduated from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London; his main research area is the pilgrimage to Mount Kailash. As an editor and conference organizer, he made significant contributions to the modern study of pilgrimage in Tibet. He realized that textual study alone is no longer enough to understand pilgrimage in Tibet and Tibetan culture, and so his compilation *Pilgrimage in Tibet* (McKay 1998) gives a collection of essays written by scholars from different disciplines including anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and so on. Toni Huber is another scholar who researches pilgrimage and sacred geography in Tibet at Humboldt University in Berlin. In his compilation *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture* (Huber 1999), all essays attempt to document and interpret how Tibetan people define sacredness and their relationship with it. In addition, Samten Gyeltsen Karmay is worth mentioning as a scholar in this research field. Unlike Western Tibetologists, he is a Tibetan and received both complete Tibetan religious training and Western academic training. After obtaining the degree of *geshe* (*geshé*) in Tibet, the highest academic degree in Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, he went to the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London to study western Tibetology, obtaining a PhD degree there. With the double-degree and double-identity,

Karmay gives an extraordinary interpretation on worship to mountain gods and pilgrimage in Tibet from both emic and etic perspectives in his two-volume collection of essays *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet* (Karmay 1998, 2005).

For the essays in these three books, a Tibetan scholar in China, Caibei, has already done a summary review. In her essay *The Study and Analysis of Sacred Geography in Tibet under the Western Perspective of Pilgrimage* (Caibei 2010), she analyzed the thirty-one essays focusing on pilgrimage by topic, method, and places of fieldwork. She found that these essays are mainly based on studies of texts and iconography and summarized four features: first, pilgrimage is the main perspective by which Western scholars study sacred geography and landscape, especially in folk religion. It expresses their background of anthropological theories, especially a rethinking of Victor Tuner's theories in the context of pilgrimages in Tibet; second, Western scholars prefer profound case studies rather than general discussions of big topics; third, almost every essay focuses on Tibetan literature or texts. It reflects the emic perspective of anthropology to understand pilgrimage in Tibetan cultural contexts; fourth, studies of pilgrimages aim to offer new perspectives, such as seeking the reason for pilgrimage from personal experience, tracing cultural changes by landscape, or promoting classic Tibetan studies (Caibei 2010: 117).

During the time when Tibet was closed to foreigners, Chinese scholars wrote many works about Tibet. Although some of them are usually ignored by western academics because of their relatively low quality and obvious political bent, there are still some worthy ethnographic studies. As my mother tongue is Chinese, I have used more Chinese references in this thesis to support my study than other Western works, some of which have never been mentioned in English before. Although in Chinese literature, most references to

circumambulation are in itineraries and general introductions, there are still some academic works focused on this field. The most important one is a doctoral dissertation, *The Sacred Circumambulation in Lhasa: a Study of the Sacred Space and Time Living*, written by Hu Sheng Zhang (Zhang 2006). Zhang is a Han Chinese who has lived in Lhasa for more than twenty years, and is currently a professor at Tibet University. In his dissertation, he gives a specific account of the circumambulations made by laymen, particularly in Lhasa, including the circumambulation paths, religious practices while circumambulating, and personal religious experiences of circumambulation. Through his fieldwork in Lhasa, he interprets circumambulation as a daily religious practice made by common people under the institutional system of Tibetan Buddhism and reflective of Tibetan people's knowledge structure; Tibetan people establish a unique relationship between space and time through circumambulation, and in this relationship, human, time, and space are unified organically; and circumambulation is a spontaneous religious practice that represents the consistency of individuals and groups (Zhang 2006: 172-174). Zhang's research gives a detailed ethnography from the perspectives of folklore study and ordinary Tibetans. It is the first monograph in this field in China; however, it still leaves blanks, being the study of circumambulation is in a single sacred city. In this aspect, the Western researchers provide a broader view of circumambulation under the perspective of pilgrimage.

In addition, another Chinese scholar, Jing Hua Zhang, first paid close attention to the circular phenomena in Tibetan Buddhism. In his article (Zhang 1989), he notices the universality of the circle in Tibetan culture and summarizes the circles of street, architecture, stupa, religious instrument, natural landscape, dance, and mantra. His conclusion, however, simply links the circle with samsara. He concludes that as a consequence of this emphasis on circularity, Tibet was backward before China took over Tibet and promoted modernization. He argued, for

example, that “actually, circular movement is a cycle without advance, its social function is stagnation; that is the spiritual reason that Tibet was behind modern society before Democratic Reform in 1959” (Zhang 1989: 74, translated by author). I understand that Chinese scholars had to do this, 1989 was a special year when both Tibet and Beijing had political turmoil. Zhang was still the first one to focus on circular symbolism in Tibet and to publish on this topic in China.

Unlike previous studies, which emphasize Tibetan textual study and particular case studies from the perspective of pilgrimage, and which consider circumambulation to be an aspect of pilgrimage ritual, my analysis focuses on circumambulation itself. Here, I consider pilgrimage to be a long-distance and large-scale circumambulation and establish a model of circumambulation in Tibet based on different scales. Based on my literature review, participant observation, and personal circumambulation in Lhasa, Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar, I attempt to interpret how Tibetans indicate their culture and philosophy by circumambulation in a broad sense.

For each category of circumambulation, I chose one representative case and did fieldwork in summer 2012. It was a turbulent year in Tibet with media reports of many self-immolations and other turmoil, and the atmosphere there was tense. I do not speak Tibetan and did not have the opportunity to meet many Tibetan people. Because I stayed there a short time, I only made casual conversation with some pilgrims and did not conduct in-depth interviews. Anthropologists and journalists were not welcome at this time; to protect my informants and myself, I did not record any conversations, instead writing them afterwards from my memory.

Chapter II. Circumambulation of Natural Landscape

Mountains: Mount Kailash

Traditional livelihood in Tibet is based on herding and agriculture, and intensive agriculture is not practiced because of the harsh climate and low population. People mainly rely on natural conditions and the magic, which can change those conditions, rather than on agricultural technology. With this compact and intense relationship between human and environment, plus the geographic fact that the Tibetan Plateau abounds with mountains and lakes, it is easy to see how the worship of mountains, lakes, and animals formed, expressing this relation religiously.

The Tibetan people consider the deities of mountains as *gzhi bdag* (*zhi dak*) the 'owner of base', or *yul lha* (*yül la*), the 'territorial god'. These deities are related closely to the regions they are located in and are believed to give particular power to the local chief (Karmay 1998: 432). Before the introduction of Buddhism, the cult of the mountain belonged to laymen; after the arrival of Buddhism, some of the mountains became *gnas ri* (*né ri*), the 'mountain where holy people lived', especially the holy Buddhists by the process of Buddhicisation and the ritual of circumambulation materializing and consolidating this transformation (Buffetrille 1998: 20-23). Now, not only do local people venerate these mountains, but so do pilgrims from other parts of Tibet. These mountains are also believed to be repositories for the hidden treasures of previous saints, and thus have become the guardians of the treasure. Traditionally, Tibetan people worship mountain deities with the *bsang* (*sang*) 'purification' ritual, which is an immolated offering made by burning juniper branches, *tsampa*, and tea. Besides the mountains, Tibetan people perform the *bsang* ritual daily to pray for happiness. The cult of the mountain, *yul lha*, in which laymen make propitiation, is only concerned with

local and mundane affairs rather than spiritual reward. By contrast, the people who venerate the mountains as *gnas ri* expect to obtain spiritual enlightenment through the ritual of circumambulation, which does not happen in the cult of *yul lha* (Karmay 2005: 33-34). A description of the cult of *yul lha* would be outside of the scope of the present thesis and beyond my present ability.

Mountain has different meanings to different people; as for what is a mountain in the Tibetan context, in his doctoral dissertation, Huber gives an answer in summary:

> To the Tibetan Tantric practitioner, it is a potential relationship-partner of a certain kind. The mountain is experienced intensely as a place with which one may enter into a “shamanic” relationship within a context of specialized Buddhist practice […] To many other Tibetans, it is the home or locus of powerful spirit forces, or is consubstantial with those forces. Its gods and goddesses have to be prayed to, bargained with or placated by offerings, and generally treated with the respect due to higher-status beings […] Further, the mountain is a physical body or set of bodies which can be seen in the landscape, as it is animated in various ways on both large and small scales […] Finally, the mountain is a source of an empowerment which is atemporal and differentially distributed in space, and which gives the positive value to the physical relationship Tibetans can have with its environment. (Huber 1993: 245-246)

Among the mountains designated as *gnas ri* which pilgrims circumambulate, I have chosen Mount Kailash as the place to do the fieldwork and conduct circumambulation in person because of its significant representativeness.

There are two famous mountains with international reputation in Tibet: one is Mount Everest, the highest mountain on Earth; the other is Mount Kailash or Kailas, the center of the world according to four religions. For most Han Chinese, Mount Everest is famous for its geographic features; people go there for tourism and expeditions, especially the commercial climbs which have become available. By contrast, not many of them know Mount Kailash since it is far away and its significant religious value is unfamiliar to most Han Chinese. However, it attracts many foreigners such as Western missionaries, explorers, travelers, Indian pilgrims, and Japanese monks.

The Western world did not know Mountain Kailash and Lake Manasarovar until the 18th century. Charles Allen's book *A Mountain in Tibet* (Allen 1982) gives a summary of early Westerners who has been in this region, from the first Westerner, Father Ippolito Desideri, an Italian Jesuit missionary, to Swedish explorer Sven Hedin. The most famous of these early explorers must be Sven Hedin. He completed the discovery of Tibet after his last journey through Central Asia in 1908, filling in the last blank on the map of Tibet. He gave solid and detailed geographical information on Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar in his three-volume *Trans-Himalaya: Discoveries and Adventures in Tibet* (Hedin 1909, 1909, 1913); some of his descriptions of Tibetans still hold true after more than 100 years, and I still saw the same thing when I was in Tibet in 2012.

As a sacred mountain for Hinduism and Jainism, Mount Kailash also attracted Indian pilgrims before Tibet was closed to foreigners. One of them who merits mention is Swami Pranavananda, an Indian physician and scientific officer. He first visited Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar in 1928 and visited there every year after 1935. He spent 2-6 months during every visit, mainly for his spiritual practices, and spent more than two years (1936,

1943) as a resident at Trugo Monastery. Prior to 1950, he had circumambulated Mount Kailash 22 times, and 25 times around Lake Manasarovar. However, he was more notable for his scientific works. During his leisure time, he conducted varied research of the Kailash-Manasarovar region, his book *Kailas-Manasarovar* (Pranavananda 1949) is an encyclopedic work including a general introduction to Tibetan religions and research on geography, geology, botany, zoology, and archaeology. He revised Sven Hedin's work on the source of four rivers, namely the Brahmaputra, the Indus, the Sutlej and the Karnali in India. Some knowledge of his work is still very useful today.

Japanese monks also had a strong interest in Tibet because they have and still practice the tradition of Tantric Buddhism. Since the late 19th century, some Japanese monks have travelled to Tibet to collect Buddhist texts. Among them, Ekai Kawaguchi entered Tibet from Nepal in 1900 and was the first Japanese person to go to Lhasa. In his *Three Years in Tibet* (Kawaguchi 1909, chap. 26-31), he recorded his journey to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar. Although some of his descriptions are not accurate and his comments about Tibetan customs are biased, his work drew people's attention to Tibet and inspired Tibetan studies in Japan.

After 1980, when Tibet was opened to world, more foreign travelers could go to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar, and more travel guides and travelogues were published. Some of these travel writings bring a wealth information about pilgrimage and offer more up-to-date descriptions of Tibet. In *The Sacred Mountain of Tibet* (Johnson and Moran 1989), Russell Johnson and Kerry Moran offer a highly readable account of their journey to Mount Kailash. Although this book mostly consists of pictures, these amazing images vividly show not only the sites and what people do during circumambulation, but also the magnificent

natural scenery, bringing to mind the adage, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” They also describe the contrary attitudes of Tibetans and Westerners to Mountain Kailash: Tibetans show extreme piety towards it; however Westerners think Tibetans are extremely superstitious. For this, Johnson and Moran explain that:

> The reality of Kailas is of a sort approached not by logic, but by faith—and this is not blind belief, but simply a confidence in the validity of experiences beyond the realm of facts and the senses. This is the secret of all the rituals of pilgrimage, the prostrations and mantras and circumambulations, the piled stones and tattered prayer flags. Their importance is not in the acts themselves, but in the attitude they create: openness to a higher state of being, a profound reverence for the natural perfection expressed by Kailas and Manasarovar, and a belief in the potential in every being to touch that perfection. (Johnson and Moran 1989: 122)

John Snelling’s book *The Sacred Mountain* (Snelling 1990) is another good travel guide to Mount Kailash. Although he never went to Mount Kailash due to illness, he gives different routes there and discusses its religious significance in Hinduism, Jainism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Bon. Besides that, he extends Charles Allen’s work on travelers who have visited Mount Kailash and provides information from recent travelers including Bradley Rowe, Victor Chan, William Forbes, Sue Burns and Reinhold Messner.

Colin Thubron, the famous British travel writer, also has a travelogue of his journey to Mount Kailash, *To a Mountain in Tibet* (Thubron 2011). Unlike pilgrims, he writes his experience from the perspective of a layman. He went to Mount Kailash on account of the death of his family and wanted to leave a sign of their passage. In this book, he describes the natural

scenery with his beautiful writing and discussion of Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism. Chapters 13 and 14 provide his observations of circumambulation of Mount Kailash, in which he observed the importance of the circle and walking in Tibetan culture:

> Whether in the ritual of pilgrimage, the cycles of reincarnation or the revolution of the Buddhist Wheel, the circle is here the shape of the sacred. In folklore, gods, demons and even reptiles perform kora. By this dignity of walking, pilgrims acquire future merit and earthly happiness, and sometimes whole families pour round Kailas with their herd and dogs—all sentient creatures will accrue merit—after travelling here for hundreds of miles. (Thubron 2011: 156)

Mount Kailash is located near Darchen town, Baga township, Pulan County, Ngari. It is not an easy place to get to, even when you have already been in Tibet. Following the paved road from Lhasa to Shiquanhe, the capital town of Ngari, a route also known as the South Line, it usually takes 20 hours to get to Mount Kailash from Lhasa by car. If going there on the North Line, it takes much longer, and the way is often blocked because of poor weather and road conditions. I chose the South Line to get to Mount Kailash in 2012; my destination was a town named Darchen, which is near the mountain, though you cannot find it on maps published in China. Darchen is a small town reliant on the pilgrimage to Mount Kailash; most restaurants and hostels are run by Han Chinese from Sichuan Province, and the businesses here are obviously seasonal—open in summer and closed in winter. Mostly Tibetans, meanwhile, run the businesses on the circumambulation path itself, working as porters and horsemen, and offering lodging. Some also run shops selling religious objects in town.

In Tibetan, Mount Kailash is known as *gangs ti se* (*gang ti sé*) 'brisk mountain' or *gangs rinpoche* (*gang rinpoché*) 'precious treasure of mountain' (Tsering 1996: 67). It is recognizable by its pyramid-shaped main peak (see Figure 1). Although it stands only 6,714 m, short in comparison to other peaks in the Himalayas, it has not yet been climbed (Snelling 1990: 120). It is the source of four rivers: *rta mchog gtsang po* (*ta chok tsang po*) 'Horse Fountain River', headwater of the Yarlung River (the Brahmaputra River in India); *seng ge gtsang po* (*seng gé tsang po*) 'Lion Fountain River', the main headwater of the Indus River; *glang chen gtsang po* (*lang chen tsang po*) 'Elephant Fountain River', headwater of the Sutlej River (a main tributary of the Indus River); and *ma ja gtsang po* (*ma ja tsang po*) 'Peacock River', headwater of the Karnali River (a main tributary of the Ganges). These four animals are considered as mounts of Dhyani Buddhas, who are incarnations of Buddha's good qualities in Vajrayana Buddhism; thus these rivers symbolize parts of the mandala of the universe, of which Mount Kailash is the center (Lama Anagarika Govinda 2006: 274). Coincidentally, Mount Kailash is also the holy mountain of four religions—Bon, Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism—as the *axis mundi*, that is the world axis or center of the world. This is a very common concept in many religions and mythologies, according to Mircea Eliade: "Every microcosm, every inhabited region, has what may be called a 'Centre'; that is to say, a place that is sacred above all" (Eliade 1991: 39).

Figure 1. Mount Kailash. Photo by the author, 2012.

The worship of Mount Kailash can be traced back to primitive Bon, coming before Shenrab Miwoche. According to the cosmology of Bon, the universe is divided into three layers. The upper layer is *lha* (*la*) for the deities; the middle layer is *gnyan* (*nyen*) for the humans; the lower layer is *klu* (*lu*) for aquatic creatures that live in the underworld (Tsering 1996: 67). The Mount Kailash is in the middle of *gnyan* and its crystal peak is like a cross-shaped *dorje* (*dojé*) 'thunderbolt' which can reach the upper layer and lower layers. Primitive deities are connected with Mount Kailash; for example, *gu byi mang ske* (*gu ji mang ké*) arrived at Mount Kailash in the incarnation of a white yak as the protector of Bon (Tsering 1996: 68). It is believed that there is a ladder of sky known as *dmu thag* (*mu tak*) or *gnam thag* (*nam tak*) at the peak of Mount Kailsh (Xie 1988: 91) which attracted adherents to conduct pilgrimages from the neighboring areas of Zhang Zhuang. After Bon was founded by Shenrab Miwoche, Mount Kailash became a place for ascetic practice. It is said that Shenrab Miwoche taught esoteric teachings to the Bon practitioners of Zhang Zhuang when he passed by Mount Kaish to chase his foe. Currently, there are relics of 37 *vdu gnas* (*vadu né*) 'gathering places', 27

gnas mchog (*né chok*) ‘sacred places’ and eight sky burial platforms at Mount Kailash (Tsering 1996: 69).

After the introduction of Buddhism, Bon lost its dominance. In order to survive, it absorbed many concepts and dharma from Buddhism and changed its outer forms. To create a world like the Land of Bliss in Buddhism, it used the birthplace of Shenrab Miwoche and the landscape of Mount Kailash as a foundation and created the Tagzig Olmo Lung Ring with a new meaning ‘Under the eternal mercy of Shenrob Miwoche, there is no pain of samsara and one can gain eternal happiness’. In this world, Mount Meru in Buddhism is replaced by the nine-layer Yung Drung Mountain based on Mount Kailash. The adherents of Bon believe they can obtain power, cleanse sin, and be born in the layer of *lha* in next life by circumambulation of the sacred mountain (Tsering 1996:70-71).

In Buddhist cosmology, vertically the world consists of the Formless Realm, the Form Realm, and the Desire Realm; horizontally the world consists of the great sea, four continents, eight subcontinents, the Sun, the Moon, seven rings of Gold Mountain, and the Ring of Iron Mountain. In the middle of this world is Mount Meru. One thousand such small worlds constitute a middle world and one thousand such middle worlds constitute a large world; this is known as a trichiliocosm. Each trichiliocosm is mastered by a buddha. Since there are infinite buddhas, there are infinite trichiliocosms (Dirhagama Vol. 20).

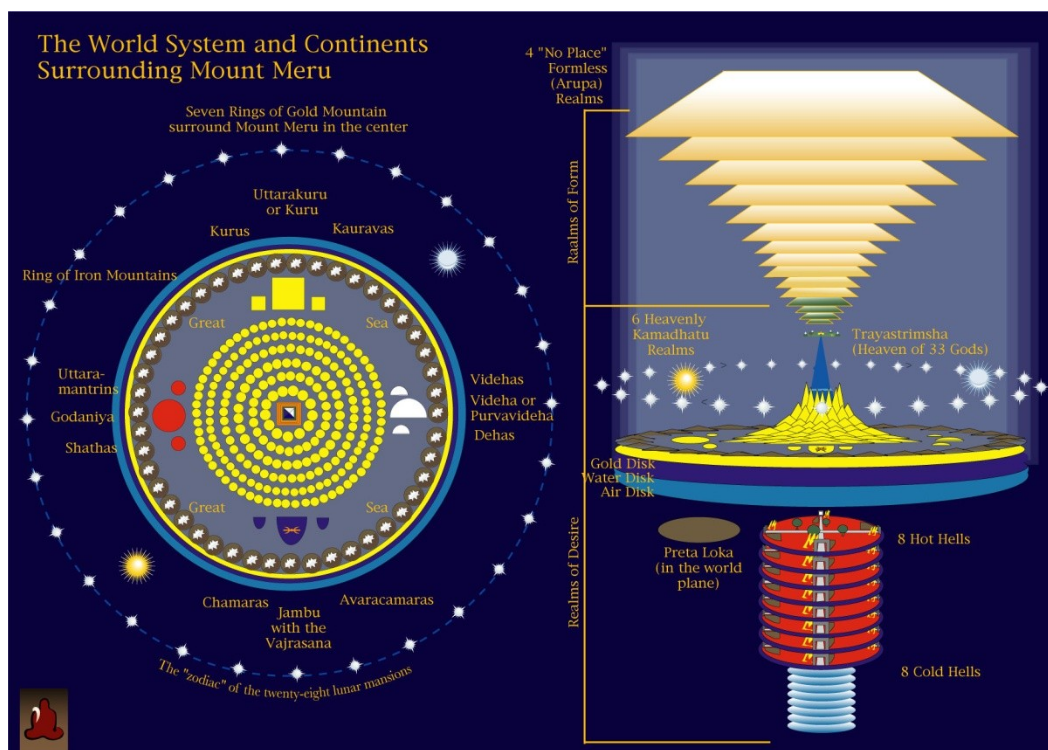


Figure 2. Buddhist Cosmology. Source: Abhidharma.

In terms of the location of Mount Meru, there are some disputes. However, Mount Kailsh has gradually become linked with Mount Meru. According to the pilgrimage guide *Tise lo rgyus* (*tisé lo gyü*) written by a hierarch of one tributary lineage of Kagyupa in 1896, it is said that:

> After the earlier world was destroyed by fire, water and wind, there were 21 Kalpas of emptiness. Then appeared according to Karma of the beings a white light of ether called "completely pure thought" which alone was able to support the three thousand-fold cosmic sphere. Then fire which was aroused by red and yellow wind put the air into motion which was of sapphire colour and round in form. Over the wind circles of water assembled as golden rain clouds. On top of it formed a golden land of square shape with mountain ranges, oceans and continents. In the centre was Mount Meru, surrounded by golden and iron mountains. It is said this is also

> Mount Tise, the head which unites four rivers, in the navel of Jambudvipa.
>
> (Loseries-Leick 1998: 153)

In Tibetan Buddhism, Mount Kailash is considered the mandala of Cakrasamvara, one of the five most important deities in Vajrayana practice. Kagyupa is connected closely with Mount Kailash. It is said that Milarepa went to Mount Kailash to do ascetic practice at his master Marpa's request and met a Bon practitioner, Na Ro Bon Chuang. Na Ro Bon Chuang asserted that Mount Kailash is the sacred mountain of Bon and asked Milarepa to leave unless he converted to Bon. Similarly, Milarepa asserted it is sacred mountain of Buddhism and asked Na Ro Bon Chuang to leave unless he converted to Buddhism. As a result, they used a magic contest to decide who could practice there. After a series of fights, Milarepa had an advantage over Na Ro Bon Chuang, so Na Ro Bon Chuang suggested a final competition of climbing to the top of Mount Kailash. While Na Ro Bon Chuang flew on his magic drum to the peak, Milarepa beamed himself to the peak immediately in a white light. Consequently, Na Ro Bon Chuang failed and Mount Kailash has become the Buddhist sacred mountain and place for retreat since then (Tsering 1996: 75).

In Hinduism, besides its connection with Mount Meru, Mount Kailash is also associated with Shiva. According to the mythological Churning of the Ocean of Milk in the *Puranas*, *devas* 'deities' and a*suras* 'demons' churned the Ocean of Milk to find the nectar of immortality. During the churning, they found a lethal poison which could contaminate the milk ocean and destroy all creation. Vishnu suggested they ask Shiva for help, and Shiva inhaled the poison and saved the world. However, the poison was so powerful that Shiva felt very hot and wanted to find a cool place to release the pain; he chose Mount Kailash as his residence.

Since his throat was burned by the poison, Shiva is also known as the blue-throated one (Huang 1986: 62-65).

Jainism was established before Buddhism, and its many concepts like samsara, reason, and result influenced Buddhism. To Jainists, Mount Kailash is considered as Astapada, the place where the first Tirthankara Risabha, the founder of Jainism, attained liberation. Tirthakara is the title for the head of Jainism and means 'the one who has cut through the ocean of samsara towards liberation' (Loseries-Leick 1998: 149). Because of this, Mount Kailash has become the sacred mountain for Jainists, and they believe a pilgrimage there can bring the highest transcendental rewards (Tsering 1996: 74).

Historically, as these four religions interacted with each other, Mount Kailash has become a pilgrimage center in the Himalayan region. "To see the greatness of a mountain, one must keep one's distance; to understand its form, one must move around it" (Lama Anagarika Govinda 2006: 272). Every year, pilgrims from Tibet, India, and Nepal go to circumambulate it, especially in the Year of the Horse, which is considered the most auspicious time by Tibetan Buddhists; in this year, one circumambulation is equivalent to 13 circles in ordinary years. According to the same pilgrimage guide, circumambulation at different times gains different benefits:

> If you circumambulate one circuit around the great palace of Ti-se, the obscurations of one life will be purified. Accordingly, if you circumambulate it ten times, the obscurations of a cosmic age will be purified. If you do one hundred circumambulations, after perfecting the ten marks and eight qualities, you will attain Buddhahood in one lifetime. (Huber and Rigzin 1999: 139)

Traditionally, there are three circumambulatory paths of Mount Kailash for particular kinds of living beings: the longest, *phyi skor* (*chi kor*) 'the outer one', for ordinary human beings; *bar skor* (*bar kor*) 'the intermediate one' for the *daka* and the *dakini*[9], the embodiment of enlightenment energy; and *nang skor* (*nang kor*) 'the inner one', for the five hundred arhats[10] (Buffetrille 1998: 26). Nowadays, following oral tradition, people who have finished 13 circumambulations on the outer path can circumambulate the inner one. There is a legend in the same pilgrimage guide:

> It is said that in the past, at the small lake which is at the top of the sGrol-ma La pass, a woman pilgrim from Khams who was carrying a small child on her back, bent over to take a drink of water. Because she did this the child slipped into the water and died. Ever since that time, the surface of the lake has been closed over [by ice]. The Khams-pa woman began to accumulate circumambulations to atone for the killing of the child. Thus, when she had made 13 circuits she produced imprints of her hands and feet on a stone as a mark of the purification of her obscurations, and she passed on to the Abode of Celestial Action (Khecara) in the rainbow-body state. (Huber and Rigzin 1999: 139)

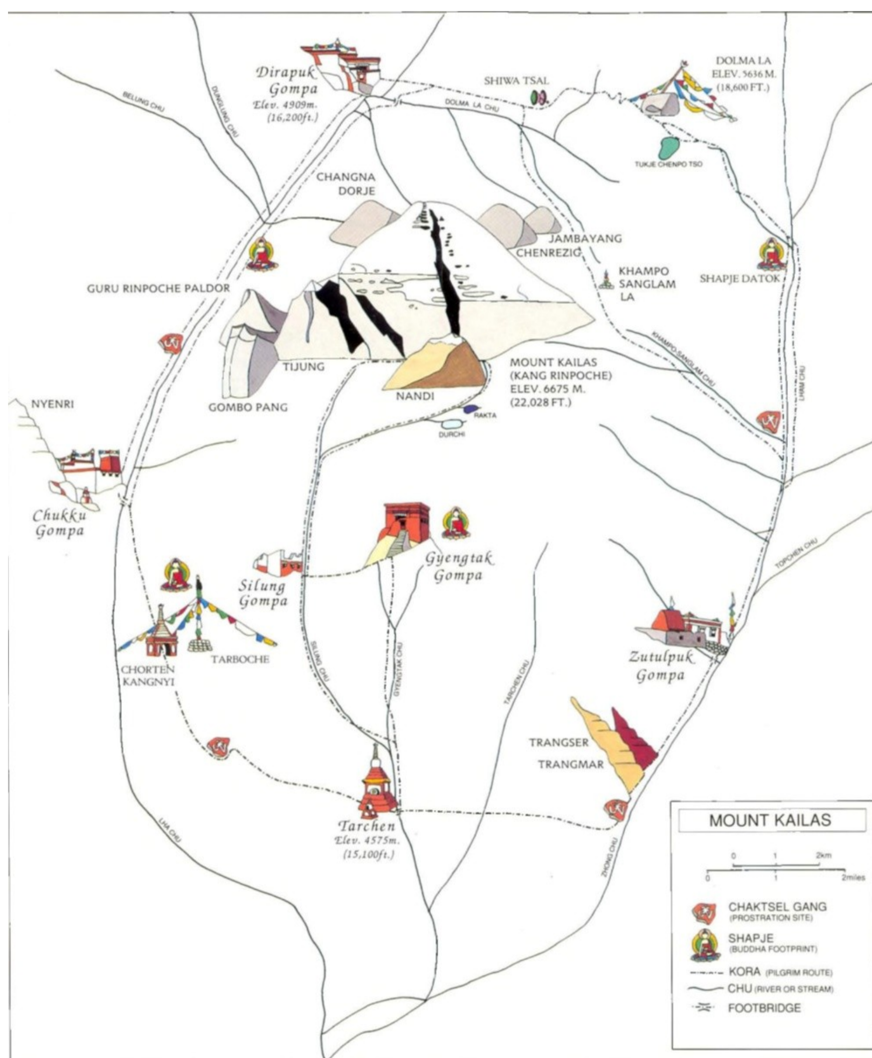
I arrived in Darchen, the town near the foot of Mount Kailash, at noon after a 24-hour non-stop bus ride. The bus only stopped by the side of the road, and I needed to walk into town from there. At the road into town there is a ticket box set up by local people to sell entry permits (200 RMB, about 35 CAD) to tourists. Since it meant a lot to me, and one Tibetan told me on the bus that I could take a detour to escape it, I walked across the grass to the town instead of the paved road, and the result was it took me an hour to get into town over a

[9] Daka and Dakini, literally meaning 'sky walker' are male and female practitioners of Tantric Buddhism, who are believed as incarnation of some buddhas and bodhisattvas.
[10] People who have attained nirvana.

distance it would take five minutes to drive. I also had my first experience of hypoxia; although I had been in Lhasa for several days, Darchen is about 1000 m higher than Lhasa, and with a 50-pound backpack, I had to take a rest every five minutes.

Darchen is a very little town that has developed because of the pilgrimage. It only had 20 households in the 1990s; as more and more tourists and pilgrims came here, local people started to built hostels and restaurants for them. Presently, there are more than 100 households there, and some local villagers are still nomads, so they rent out their houses to businessmen from the Chinese interior when they are out of town herding. The infrastructure of the town is not very well developed; there is still no electrical grid here, and hostels run their own generators from 9:00 PM to 12:00 PM every day. The hostels do not have water for showers, but there is one public bathhouse in the town.

It was too late for me to circumambulate that first day, so I planned to start the next morning and found a hostel to stay at. The owners of the hostel were Han Chinese from Sichuan; they told me the hostel is only open from March to October, and for the rest of year they go home. The main customers are tourists and pilgrims; two groups of Indian pilgrims had already stayed there before I arrived. I went to a halal noodle shop for dinner; the owner was a Muslim from Qinghai, and he told me he would move home next year because business was not good. After I tasted his noodles, I thought I knew the reason. Due to low atmospheric pressure in high altitude areas, the boiling point of water is about 80˚C, which makes it impossible to properly cook rice and noodles. Perhaps this explains why *tsampa* is the main food in Tibet.



Map 3. The circumambulatory path of Mount Kailash. Source: Johnson and Moran 1989: 125.

The distance of the whole outer circumambulation path is approximately 54 km. Tibetans usually take one day to finish it, whereas I planned for two days. I woke up at 6:00 AM the next day and started to circumambulate after breakfast. By the time I started my circumambulation, some Tibetans had already set out on their way. They walked while rotating prayer wheels, and I could hear the murmur of "*om mani padme hum"* (*om ma ni padmé hum*) as they passed me by. It is the mantra of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, meaning 'adoration to the Jewel in the Lotus, amen'. This is the most common symbol in Tibet and is almost everywhere: walls, stones, paper, the people's mouths, and so on. Such things usually

took on the word "*mani*" (*mani*), such as mani stones (see Figure 3). Sven Hedin has a vivid description about this:

> The mystic words rang constantly in my ears. I heard them when the sun rose and when I blew out my light, and I did not escape them even in the wilderness, for my own men murmured "Om mani padme hum". They belong to Tibet, these word; they are inseparable from it: I cannot imagine the snow-capped mountains and the blue lakes without them. They are as closely connected with this country as buzzing with the bee-hive, as the flutter of streamers with the pass, as the ceaseless west wind with its howling. (Hedin 1909: 206)

Figure 3. Mani stone. Photo by the author, 2012.

I could not follow them because they walked so fast, but after a while I met a group of Western pilgrims at the first of four devotional spots where pilgrims prostrate themselves to the summit of Mount Kailash. They piously prostrated to the mountain and prayed, which

attracted my attention. I waited for them to finish and tried to talk to the last one in their queue; he was an American Indian and Hindu who teaches people with disabilities in Chicago. He told me that foreigners cannot come on pilgrimage by themselves; rather, they must be part of a local tourist group with a guide. I asked him what he prayed for just now; he said it was for better life and his disabled students. From his outfit and behavior, I guessed he was part of the middle class in the United States; obviously he was not there for fun, but was a serious pilgrim.

There is a big pole called *darchen* (*darchen*) in Tibetan from which hangs the wind-horse flags (see Figure 4); it is also named Tarboche in the English literature. People believe that when the wind blows the wind-horse flags, it reads the mantra on them and spreads the merit to the places where the wind goes. This has not change from the old picture I saw in the book *Pilgrimage in Tibet*. There is also a big one in the town of Darchen town that is raised every April in the Tibetan calendar to commemorate the Buddha’s birth. This is probably the source of the town’s name.

Figure 4. Wind-horse flag. Photo by the author, 2012.

Then I took a rest in a store under the Chukku Monastery or *chukku gompa* (*chuku gompa*) in Tibetan, which is the first of three monasteries on the outer path Chukku Monastery, Dirapuk Monastery and Zutulpuk Monastery; all belong to Kagyupa to commemorate its victory in the conflict against Bon at Mount Kailash. In the store, I met an old German couple with their Tibetan guide. They came here to trek, but after a rest I saw them rent horses to ride, and the Tibetan guide told me they had hypoxia and really wanted to finish the circumambulation. I asked him if riding a horse would nullify the merit of circumambulation; he smiled and said: "It still can gain merit, but not as much as walking. Whatever, they are foreigners and not pilgrims." I continued my walk after they left and I did not meet anyone until I took a rest at another store in a tent. Here I saw a Westerner who could speak with the store owner in Tibetan; I tried to talk with that man and learned that he is a Tibetan Buddhist from Germany who studied Tibetan in Nepal for one year. This was his second pilgrimage here.

Before I reached the day's destination—a hostel under the north face of Mount Kailash and in the middle of the outer circumambulatory path, I met a Tibetan woman with two little girls. Their appearance looked the most characteristic of the Tibetan pilgrims I saw that day: shabby clothes, dirty and tangled hair and red-black faces, but with clear eyes. The woman could not speak Mandarin and just smiled to me; the two little girls were not shy to strangers and expressed an interest in my camera. One of them could speak a little Mandarin and talked to me.

Girl: What is that?

Me: Camera.

Girl: (*Grabs camera and tries to figure it out by herself.*)

Me: Are you three a family?

Girl: (*Nodding*) Mom and sister.

Me: Are you in school?

Girl: (*Nodding*) Grade one.

Me: Why do you do this (circumambulation)?

Girl: Mom is ill.

She figured out how to use the camera and wanted me to take a picture of her. We went to a place where we could see the summit of Mount Kailash, and she put her palms together naturally and smiled innocently. Then I showed her the picture; she was very happy and showed it to her mom and sister. They smiled and invited me to drink yak butter tea. After I finished the tea, they nodded with a smile to say goodbye and continued their circumambulation. When I reached the hostel, the owner told me this family I had met has circumambulated Mount Kailash almost 100 times.

I woke up at 7:00 AM the next morning and started to walk. This day I needed to pass the highest point of the outer circumambulatory path, called Droma La, 'the pass of Tara'[11], which is 5636 m. I heard that three Indian pilgrims had died there recently; however, such a death in the presence of the gods at the most sacred place would realize their highest aspirations (Lama Anagarika Govinda 2006: 295). There is a symbolically important site named Shiwa Tsal before Droma La (see Figure 5); this is a place where people discard their used articles for daily use like clothes, and they also leave a lock of hair or a few drops of blood. It is believed that one can cleanse one's sins and gain a rebirth by this means; it symbolizes that the old body has died here and has been reborn as a new one. Some people also circumambulated the big pile of clothes, I asked one man why they did this:

> Me: Why do you walk around this? Does it have power?
>
> Man: I don't know. Why you are here? You are the first Han Chinese I saw this time.
>
> Me: I don't know, I am interested in it.
>
> Man: (*Laughing*) You don't know, I don't know, so just walk around. It's good, the more the better.

Most such laymen did not know the religious reason for their circumambulation or what benefits they would gain when I asked them. They may not know the reason for circumambulation, but they will perform it unfailingly. Like the little girl I met before, who might not know the meaning of holding her palms together, she did it naturally. What they expect from circumambulation is usually mundane rather than religious; although the family I met had already done almost enough circumambulations to become a buddha in this life, their

[11] Tara is one form of incarnation of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva.

aim was to cure a disease. This situation seems never to change, more than 100 years ago, Sven Hedin mentioned the same situation in his book:

> We soon discover that most of these simple pilgrims have no clear idea of the benefits their journey is supposed to confer on them […] what they are all believe most firmly and obstinately is that the pilgrimage will bring them a blessing in this world. It will ward off all evil from their tents and huts, will keep away sickness from their children and herds, protect them from robbers, thieves and losses, will send them rain, good pasturage, and increase among their yaks and sheep, will act like a talisman, and guard themselves and their property as the four spirit kings protect the images of the temple halls from demons. (Hedin 1909: 197)

Figure 5. Shiwa Tsal. Photo by the author, 2012.

Finally, I reached Droma La. The ground was covered in wind-horse flags, and some people were still tying new flags they had bought in Darchen on a string. They believe that the power

of the flags can be enhanced by taking them here during circumambulation, and that hanging them here can gain more merit because it is the highest place on the path. Although the summit of Mount Kailash cannot be seen here, people still prostrated themselves in the direction of the peak (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Tibetan woman prays at Droma La. Photo by the author, 2012.

The path gradually became easier to walk after passing Droma La, and the scene became more colorful than the day before. I saw many marmots; Tibetans do not kill them, and hunting is banned in the sacred mountain areas, so they were very fat and did not fear humans. I was able to stand very close to them. This was the first time I had seen a marmot in person; growing up in a city with few wild animals, I felt very excited. However, for Tibetans, these marmots might have been human in their previous life, or they might be in their next life. In addition, there are many other sacred relics and sites such as Buddha's footprint, Dakinis' footprints, the sacred yak's footprint, sky burial platforms, and so on. Scientifically, these sacred relics are just rocks with particular shapes; however, religiously, people believe that

they are empowered by Buddhist saints and thus can give them merit when seen, touched or circumambulated. Some footprints have already been smoothed by touching.

More and more people passed me, and suddenly I realized there were no others but me. The sun was setting and the sky was getting darker; I had to walk faster to make it to Darchen. At this time, a dog joined me. Usually dogs are considered pests in Tibet; travelers bring sticks to beat them when walking in the wild. Even the capital city Lhasa used to be teeming with feral dogs. However, this dog was quiet and peaceful; it just followed me at a distance and stopped when I stopped, so I gave it some food and kept walking. After while, I reached Zutrulphuk Monastery, where I met a lama. He saw that dog was following me and said that it used to be a human in its last life, but was reborn as a dog because of bad karma, and so it followed pilgrims and circumambulated thus to be reborn as human again in its next life. Ekvall also mentions animals can gain merit from circumambulation, and it is the only religious observance in which Tibetans can bring their valued livestock as direct participants (Ekvall 1964: 235).

Just before I got back to Darchen, I saw the only other Han Chinese during my circumambulation. He was obviously not a pilgrim, or even a serious tourist, as he circumambulated counter-clockwise[12] (I am sure he was not a practitioner of Bon) and because of his appearance: wearing large headphones and walking bare-chested with his shirt unbuttoned. In his journal, Serbian professor and traveler Rakocevic mentions that one should not use modern audio devices during circumambulation (Rakocevic 2013: 108). When I passed him, he stopped and asked about the way.

[12] Although only Buddhists are required to walk clockwise, tourists are usually asked to follow this custom when travelling in Tibet to avoid embarrassment, especially in Buddhist sacred places such as Mount Kailash.

Man: This is the path to walk around the mountain, right?

Me: Yes, but you are doing it the wrong way. You should walk clockwise.

Man: Whatever, any difference?

Me: …It's too late, you cannot finish it today.

Man: Whatever, I just came to look around.

Me: All right, take care.

Many Han Chinese tourists do know Tibet very well before coming here. Although they say it is a spiritual journey, most of them are just interested in the natural scenery. This ignorance intensifies the conflict between Tibetans and Han Chinese.

By 9:00 PM, I finally returned to the hostel I had stayed at previously. I was exhausted and my feet hurt. It is said that one circuit of circumambulation can wash away the sins of one lifetime; my body seemed to feel lighter and I felt asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

Lakes: Lake Manasarovar

In the Tibetan conception of space, a mountain is usually associated with a lake. In this case, the mountain is regarded as the father, or male, and the lake is regarded as the mother, or female (Buffetrille 1998: 18). It reflects the "divine dyad" named by John Bellezza (Bellezza 1997: 1-19), just like the *yin* and *yang* in Chinese philosophy. The caves in the sacred mountain used for retreat by saints are also part of this sacred unity between mountain and lake. However, such caves are not discussed further in this thesis, as they cannot be

circumambulated[13]. In the case of Mount Kailash, the associated lake is Lake Manasarovar which is located about 25 km to the mountain's southeast.

Figure 7. Lake Manasarovar. Photo by the author, 2012.

Manasarovar is a Sanskrit word meaning 'Lake of Mind'; it is considered to be the lake created by Brahma in his mind (Allen 2001: 10). Brahma also created a sacred Jambu tree, which is invisible to humans, in the center of the lake; it is said that its fruit can turn the water of Lake Manasarovar into the nectar of immortality[14] (Lama Anagarika Govinda 2006: 277). It is also the place where Shiva's wife Uma bathes (Gele 2004: 63). In Hinduism, water has sacred and ritually purifying abilities and is connected with sacred sites. In the *Rg Veda*, the oldest Vedic text, the term *tirtha* is used to describe a river ford, or a place associated with water. Therefore, the Hindu term for pilgrimage is *tirthayatra* literally meaning 'a journey to a place of water' (McKay 1998: 166). Bathing is a vivid example of Hindu people's favor for

[13] However, people can circumambulate in the cave around some sacred objects.
[14] It is similar to the myth Churning of the Ocean of Milk because they both mention the nectar of immortality, but I do not have evidence to prove Ocean of Milk is Lake Manasarovar.

water: although the water of the Ganges is dirty in outsiders' eyes, people still bathe in it. Another reason that Lake Manasarovar attracts pilgrims from India is probably because some of Mahatma Gandhi's ashes were scattered in it.

In Tibetan, Lake Manasarovar is known as *mapam yumco* (*mapam yumco*), meaning 'undefeatable jade lake', which commemorates the victory of Buddhism. According to the pilgrimage guide *Tise lo rgyus*, at the time when the present cosmic age had just begun, a wheel-turning king wanted to alleviate the sufferings of old age, illness, and death. Following the advice of his court-priest, he practiced giving without expecting reward, so he built a charity house to collect for all the peoples of the world. He also excavated a huge pit in which to boil water for rice. In 12 years, this pit became full and turned into a lake, namely, the *mapam yumco*. It is said that its water is endowed with eight properties, so it is called the undefeatable one (Huber and Rigzin 1999: 140). In another story, it is said that there is a villainous dragon king of Bon living in the lake. Padmasambhava subdued it and converted it to become a Buddhist protector (Gele 2004: 63). This version reflects the process of Buddhicisation of the sacred places of Tibet.

According the oldest Buddhist tradition, Queen Maya, mother of the Buddha, dreamt that her guardian gods took her to the Anotatta Lake, the Pali name for Lake Manasarovar, in which she had a bath, and therefore all her human impurities were washed away. Then the future Buddha descended from the direction of Mount Kailash, appearing like a white elephant in a cloud, and entered her womb. It indicates that Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar have been worshipped since early Buddhism (Lama Anagarika Govinda 2006: 276-277).

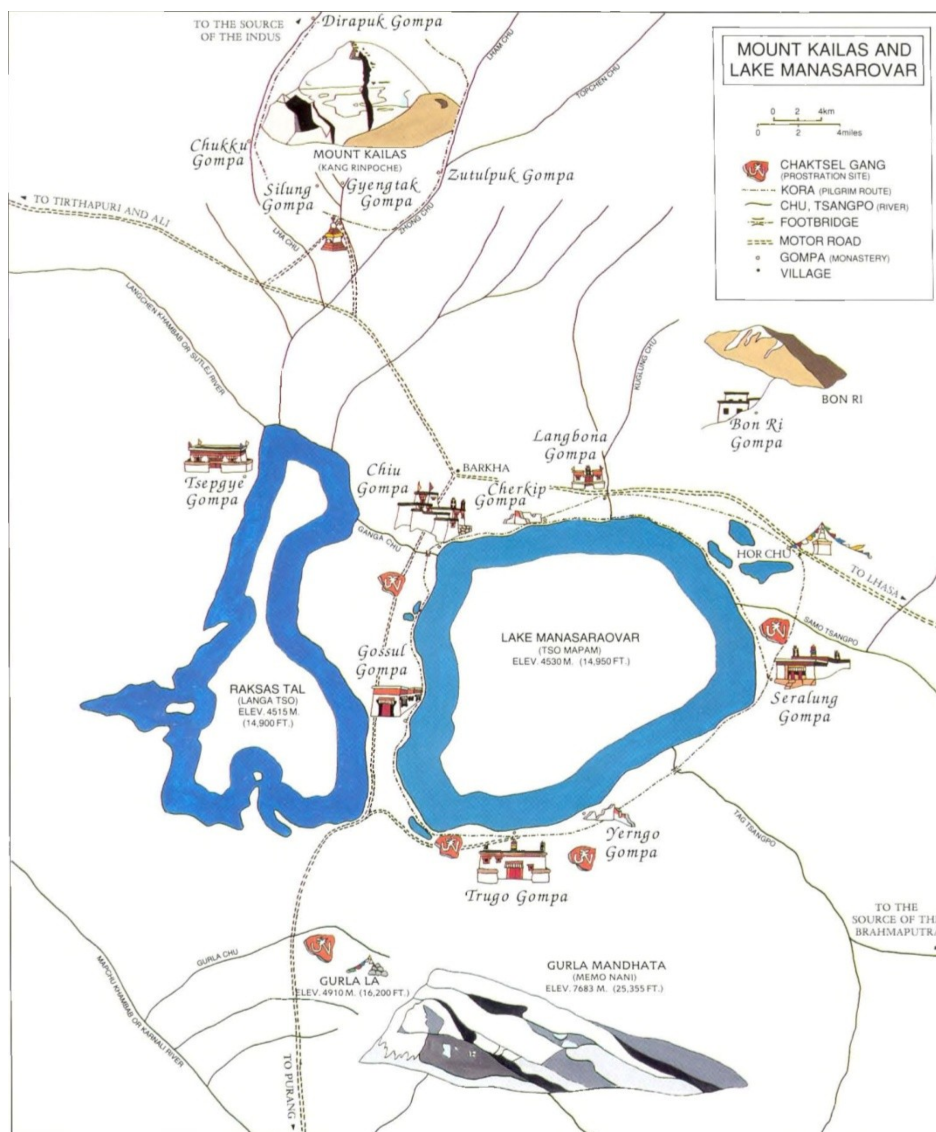
Although Lake Manasarovar is a sacred lake, Lake Rakshastal 'lake of demons' in Sanskrit or *lagngar co* (*la ang co*) in Tibetan, is located to the west of Lake Manasarovar. It is considered as a lake of demons because it lacks visible plants and animals around it. It is also named Mountain Pass Skin, as its shape resembles a hide-couch made out of a human skin. People describe it as being "In the raksasa country of Langka Pu-rang, a black lake of poison ripples" (Huber and Rigzin 1999: 139). In Tibetan tradition, Lake Manasarovar's shape is like the sun and symbolizes the force of light, while Lake Rakshastal's shape is like the moon and symbolizes the force of darkness (Lama Anagarika Govinda 2006: 275). This dualistic combination again reflects the divine dyad in Tibetan culture.

Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash are usually regarded as the Kailash-Manasrovar unity. Since this unity is a sacred area of concern to three countries—China, India and Nepal—these countries have initiated a collaborative program named The Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative to protect the ecosystem and cultures in this area. Currently, Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash are not only sacred pilgrimage sites, but also a resort for trekking. Trekkers actually walk around the whole lake on their feet, unlike some pilgrims.

Most pilgrims start their circumambulation of Lake Manasarovar from Chiu Monastery, on the west side of the lake and closed to the paved road. The total distance of this circumambulation is approximately 100 km; however, unlike Mount Kailash, vehicles can be driven along the whole circumambulatory path. Thus people have the option to drive around the lake, as done by Indian pilgrims who only stopped at the four sacred bathing places to bathe. It reflects their focus of pilgrimage on water, rather than walking. Colin Thubron states that most Hindus gave up circumambulating it long ago; perhaps because Lake Manasarovar

was created from the mind of Brahma, whose paradise is transient, they prefer to seek their final liberation in Mount Kailash (Thubron 2011: 122).

The day after I finished the circumambulation of Mount Kailash, I took the Pulan Country bus and went to Lake Manasarovar. I started my circumambulation from Chiu Monastery and took three days to finish the whole walk. During these three days, I did not see any other person walking around the lake as I did, perhaps because it was not the Year of the Goat, which is considered an auspicious time to circumambulate lakes. Another reason might be that Tibetans do the circumambulation in winter when all streams around the lake are frozen, so they will be more easily to cross (Pranavananda 1950: 18-19). Indeed, I was blocked by some rivers when I circumambulated it in summer; I had to wade across them, or otherwise I had to take a long detour. In spite of that, it was an opportunity for me to feel the individual experience of circumambulation. I intentionally did not use a watch or any other timekeeping device. I walked alone and felt that the time went slower than when I walked with others; the only sounds were the birds' calls and the waves. Since my walking pace was not fast, it seemed that the scene never changed, which made me think it would take forever to finish the circuit. I have never meditated a long time in seclusion—to say nothing of ascetics in retreat who have stayed in dark caves for three years, this might be what eternity feels like, at least for me.



Map 4. The circumambulatory path of Lake Manasarovar. Source: Johnson and Moran 1989: 124.

I did not see anyone until I arrived at the tents near Hor, my destination for the first day. My only roommate was a bicyclist who had ridden here from Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. He was a Han Chinese, and when we learned we were both from Xi’an, he talked to me more.

Cyclist: What do you do?

Me: Student, you?

Cyclist: I work for China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in Lanzhou Company.

Me: Nice job, good pay. How do you have time to do this?

Cyclist: It's so-so, I just quit it.

Me: Why?

Cyclist: It's boring. It's not what I want to do.

Me: So you rode a bicycle to Tibet?

Cyclist: Yeah, I am looking for myself. It is said that going to Tibet is the trip of the soul, isn't it?

Me: Yeah, have you found anything?

Cyclist: Not yet, but my body is getting stronger (*laughs*).

Me: That's true. What's your plan when you go back home?

Cyclist: I don't know, maybe find a job in a branch company of CNPC in Xi'an.

Me: But you just quit and said it's boring!

Cyclist: Yes, I know, but I need to make a living. Their pay is good.

Like Westerners, most Chinese people have imaginings of Tibet: on the one hand, they have a stereotype that Tibet is poor and dirty, but on the other, they think they can cleanse their souls there. Going to Tibet is becoming increasingly popular among the lower middle class and has become a symbol of high taste in China. You can see many cyclists on their way to Tibet from Sichuan, Qinghai, and Xinjing; they treat this trip as a monumental feat. Everything titled Tibet or Tibetan becomes mysterious and has magical power.

The next morning, my roommate left and I continued my journey. There was still nobody but myself. At Seralung Monastery, which was under construction, a Tibetan worker asked me to

take a picture of him. I did so and showed it to him; he was happy and wanted to give me a ride on his motorcycle to Trugo Monastery, which was my stop for the day. He had drunk a lot of beer and was not sober, so I declined the offer. After a while, he caught up with me and said he would meet me at Trugo Monastery later that day. Before I arrived at Trugo Monastery, I saw some Indian pilgrims taking a bath in the lake; a man playing golf near the shore attracted my attention. From him I learned that they joined a tourism group in Nepal to get here, and when they arrived here, the Tibet Bureau of Tourism was responsible for their pilgrimage. They had their own cook and hired local Tibetan porters and horsemen to carry their luggage. The cost of the pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar was about 20000 RMB (CAD 3300) per person. We talked about the Indian pilgrims who died during the circumambulation of Mount Kailash; he said: "Anyway, death is not a lucky thing, but dying while on pilgrimage, that's the fate. It's a good thing."

When I arrived at Trugo Monastery, I met the man who wanted to give me a ride earlier that day. Unfortunately, he had broken his left arm and asked the lama here to heal it. He joked with a wry smile and asked me to have a drink, too.

> Man: It's lucky you didn't come with me, or you would be like me (*shows me his broken arm*).
>
> Me: That's too bad.
>
> Man: It is retribution.
>
> Me: That's because you were drunk before riding.
>
> Man: I know, but why is today, I drink every day, it must because I did something bad today.
>
> Me: Drinking is bad, you know. It's a sacred lake, you cannot drink here.

Man: Maybe.

Me: You are still drinking now.

Man: (*Laughes*) Just a little, it's fine.

This conversation makes me think about how the Azande consider witchcraft, which Evans-Pritchard discussed in his book. If a granary collapsed because of termites and hurt the people who were under it, the Azande know that the granary collapsed because the support was broken by termites, and people sat under it in order to escape the heat and sunshine. However, to explain why these two events happened at precisely the same time, they believe it was due to witchcraft (Evans Pritchard 1976: 23). Similarly, this Tibetan man knew it was drinking that caused him hurt, but in terms of why it happened today, he thought it was retribution.

The Trugo Monastery hostel was the best room I stayed at during the whole circumambulation. After a good sleep here, I started my last day of the circuit. It was still quiet, and I continue to walk alone, but I met some wild animals this day. One was a *kyang* (*kyang*), a Tibetan wild ass. It was highly vigilant and ran away when I saw it. Another was an eagle sitting on a utility pole, and it followed me for a while. I knew vultures are believed to be a bad omen in Tibet; they will follow people who will die soon. However, I did not know the omen of an eagle, but since it is a sacred animal in Tibetan Buddhism, I considered it to be a good sign. Like my circumambulation of Mount Kailash, a dog joined me and walked with me again until I finished the whole walk.

Chapter III. Circumambulation of Artificial Structure

Sacred City

A city is not simply an agglomeration of buildings and people, it is a symbol. In her classic essay *The City as a Sacred Center*, Diana Eck writes, “A city is an ordered human habitation with what we might call a ‘self-image’. A city has an idea of itself. It is energy converted into culture” (Eck 1987:1). Sacred cities are especially symbolical. Some cities have “generated entire civilizations and seem to condense the culture and values of those civilizations in one place” (Eck 1987:1). Robert Redfield and Milton Singer describe such cities as “orthogenetic”: they inherit the old cultures and develop into systematic dimensions (Redfield and Singer 1969: 212). Most sacred cities are this kind of city and even become the representatives of their cultures, such as Lhasa and Jerusalem. They recreate the cosmological order and make it accessible on the human plan, thus becoming the centers of pilgrimage and even the centers of the world in some cultures (Eck 1987:2).

By sacred city, I refer to a city that is considered holy or divine, both religiously and spiritually. In my opinion, these can be divided into three categories: cities where saints were born or died; cities that have sacred objects or architectures; and cities where saints showed their supernatural powers or founded their sects and taught doctrines. Believers make pilgrimage to the sacred cities of their religions and hold it could give them more powerful reward. Almost every main religion has its sacred cities, such as Bodh Gaya for Buddhism, Mecca for Islam and Jerusalem for three religions. For Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism, Lhasa is definitely the most sacred city.

Most tourists start their trips in Tibet at Lhasa, since it is the transportation center and also the biggest city there. Unlike ancient times, they get there by different means—between walking, bicycling, driving, train and flying, especially the Qinghai-Tibet Railway makes more and more people afford to go to Tibet. Pilgrims usually go to Lhasa by car or by hitchhiking, depending on their different economic means. Extremely pious believers and people who have made big oaths even go to Lhasa by full body prostration.

In Tibetan, *lhasa* (*la sa*) literally means 'place of the gods'; it has been the capital city of Tibet since the 7th century AD when Songtsan Gampo succeed the throne of Tibetan Empire (Blondeau, Gyatso 2003: 15). As the political, cultural, and economic center of Tibet through history, Lhasa abounds with historical and religious sites: Potala Palace, Jokhang Monastery, Ramoche Temple, etc. Tibetans consider going to Lhasa to be one of their most meritorious acts in life. It allows one to get a good position in samsara, the circle of death and rebirth. For people who live in remote herding areas like Amdo and Ngari, where it is expensive and difficult to go to Ü-Tsang, a pilgrimage to Lhasa is their ultimate desire. Some pilgrims from these areas stay in Lhasa and make a living by begging after their pilgrimage until they have made enough money to return home; otherwise they start a new life in Lhasa. There used to be a particular area south of the Potala Palace for pilgrims from outside Lhasa to live, but it is banned for political reasons.

Lhasa used to be a forbidden city for foreigners and was hardly accessible (Filippis 2003: 1-14). Even after the building of the Qinghai-Tibet railway, it is still not convenient to access due to expensive transportation fees and limited capacity. Despite these limitations, Tibet has become a tourist resort in comparison to the past. A large number of tourists, most of them Han Chinese, gather in Lhasa from June to September, generally the best time of year to visit

Tibet. The amount of Han Chinese visitors, however, varies drastically by time of year. In winter, Tibetans from other places come to Jokhang Monastery, when possible, to pray for the Tibetan New Year. Besides pilgrims and tourists, there is another category of people in Lhasa—*zang piao* which literally means 'people who flow in Tibet'. Most of them are Han Chinese who are attracted by Tibetan culture and have abandoned their previous life to go to live in Lhasa. Some of them settled down and raised families; however, some of them will go back home eventually, when the fever is gone.

It is a most common scene in Lhasa for people to walk down the street while rotating a prayer wheel in their hands. Actually, they are circumambulating around sacred centers. In April of the Tibetan Calendar, circumambulation is the main activity in Lhasa, because the 15th day of this month is Buddha's birthday, also known as *Saga Dawa* (*saga dawa*) in Tibetan. During the circumambulation, pilgrims will also spin prayer wheels, practice the *bsang* ritual at the *bsang* furnaces, hang wind-horse flags on trees, and pray in monasteries on the paths.

Eck states that "sacred centers are deliberately built, and the self-conscious energy and symbolization of the culture is brought to bear upon their layout, their architecture, and their iconography" (Eck 1987: 4). From a sacred perspective, Lhasa has two main sacred centers: the Potala Palace and the Jokhang Monastery. The word *potala* in Sanskrit means 'brilliance'; it derives from Mount Potalaka, which is the residence of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, known as *Guanyin* in Chinese (Stein 1972: 84). The Potala Palace was not built at one time; in the 7th century, Songtsan Gampo started to build its precursor when he moved the capital to Lhasa and named it the Potala Palace because his *yidam* (*yidam*) 'deity of meditation' was Avalokiteśvara (Shakabpa 2010: 48, 110). The Dalai Lama, the latter master of the Potala Palace, is also considered the incarnation of Avalokiteśvara. Following the move of the

administrative center to Sakya after the collapse of the Tibetan Empire, the Potala Palace became dilapidated until the time of the fifth Dalai Lama. In the 17th century, the Gelukpa became dominant in Tibet, and Lhasa became the political center again. The fifth Dalai Lama rebuilt the Potala Palace, also known as the White Palace. After his death, it was expanded again in order to place his stupa; this expansion is also known as the Red Palace. In 1693, construction of the Potala Palace was complete (Stein 1972: 84). Since then, it has been not only the administrative center of Tibet, but also the summer residence of the Dalai Lama until 1959, when the 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet. Currently, the Potala Palace is not a purely religious place. Instead, it is a tourist attraction and World Heritage Site.

The Jokhang Monastery was also built by Songtsan Gampo. Firstly, it was used to store the Jowo Mikyo Dorje, the life-sized statue of the eight-year-old Buddha, brought by his Nepalese wife, Princess Bhrikuti. That statue was replaced by Jowo Sakyamuni or Jowo Rinpoche, a statue of Buddha at age twelve, brought by his Chinese wife, Princess Wen Cheng (Zhang 2006: 69; Shakabpa 2010: 119-120). In Tibet, people regard Jowo Rinpoche as the material incarnation of Buddha himself, and hence the Jokhang Monastery became the most sacred place in Tibet. It does not belong to any sect of Tibetan Buddhism; however, most current lamas there are Gelukpa and the ceremony of enthroning the new Dalai Lama is held in the Jokhang Monastery.

There are six circumambulation paths in Lhasa; by walking them I have found that the spiritual and mundane life of residents in Lhasa concentrates on these two sacred centers, and the six paths are formed around them. Actually, the old town area was established around circularly the Jokhang Monastery because the action of circumambulation. This is an example of how walking affects the formation of landscape as Ingold states:

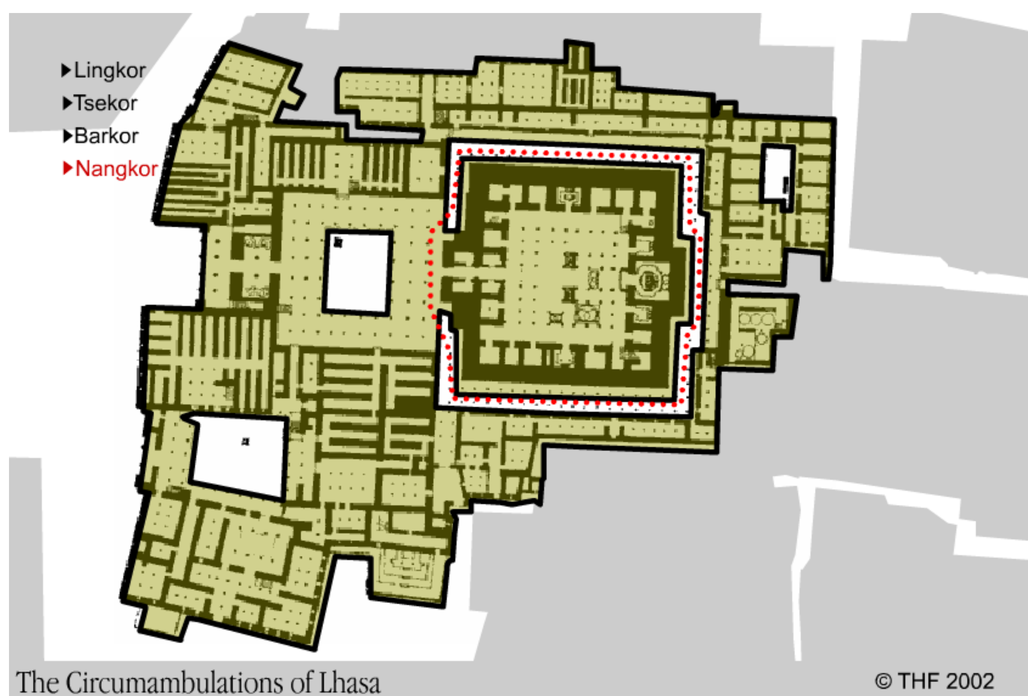
> The forms of the landscape—like the identities and capacities of its human inhabitants—are not imposed upon a material substrate but rather emerge as condensations or crystallisations of activity within a relational field. As people, in the course of their everyday lives, make their way by foot around a familiar terrain, so its paths, textures and contours, variable through the seasons, are incorporated into their own embodied capacities of movement, awareness and response. (Ingold 2011: 47)

These paths act as the bridge connecting the mundane and sacred worlds, bringing people into a "close geometrical—almost physical—relationship" with sacred sites and objects (Larsen and Sinding-Larsen 2001: 173). From short to long, they are: *nang skor*, *bar skor*, *rtse skor* (*tsé kor*), *gling skor* (*ling kor*) and two variants of *gling skor*: *stod skor* (*tö kor*) and *smud skor* (*mü kor*) (Zhang 2006: 41-63). Among them *gling skor* and *bar skor* are also the official names of the streets on the map; the other four are traditionally known. Maps here are for non-Tibetan tourists, Tibetan pilgrims gain and exchange information in the sweet tea houses where Tibetans in Lhasa usually go first each day.

Nang Skor

The first circumambulation path is *nang skor* 'inner path'. It is the path inside the Jokhang Monastery around the main chapel alongside with the stationary prayer wheels. People usually rotate those prayer wheels while circumambulating, when passing by the small shrines on the path, they will go to prostrate themselves and circumambulate around the main deities in each shrine, and then return to the *nang skor* and continue walking. Thus the circumambulation of *nang skor* contains many small circumambulations. In addition, three floors of the Jokhang Monastery have circular corridors. By walking around them, they form

three vertical circumambulations (Zhang 2006: 41-42). Currently, the Jokhang Monastery is open separately in a day, with mornings for Tibetans and afternoons for non-Tibetans, since most Tibetans are believers and most non-Tibetans are tourists. Believers are free whereas tourists pay a lot; guards of the monastery distinguish them by their appearance and speech. And so, unfortunately, I have not had the chance to see Tibetans circumambulate in person at the monastery, but I have seen the numerous offerings they have left there when I circumambulated in the afternoon.



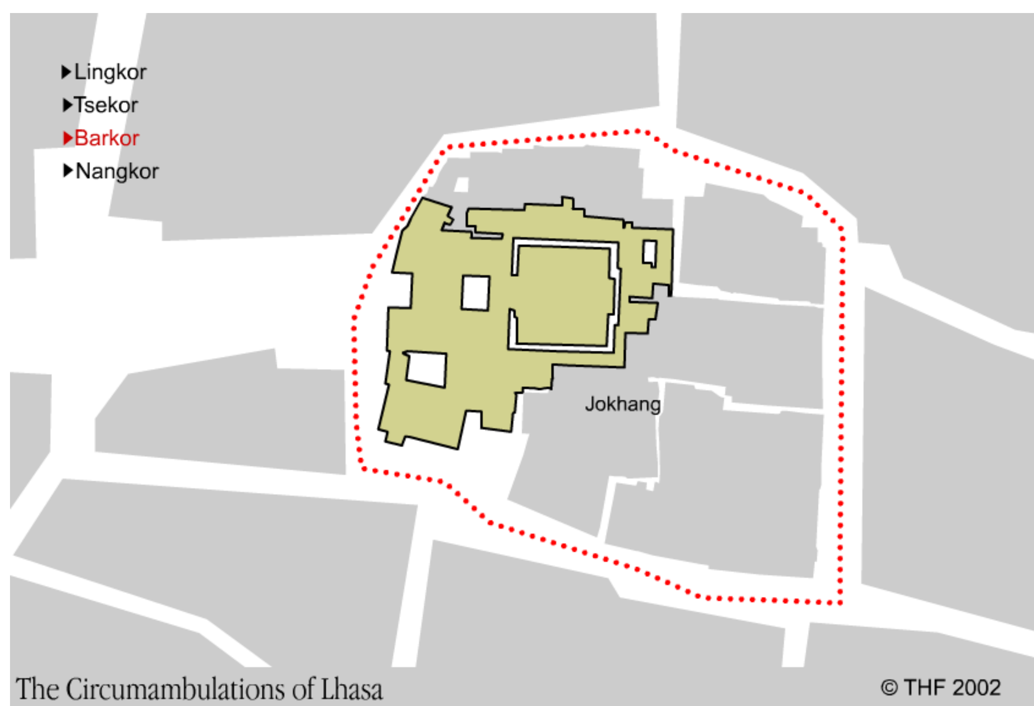
Map 5. Nang Skor. Source: Tibetan Heritage Fund.

Bar Skor

The second circumambulation path is *bar skor* 'intermediate path', it is the path around the whole Jokhang Monastery. This path is considered the sacred path which leads the way to heaven (Zhang 2006: 42-44). Crowd of people keep flowing never stopping in daytime. As the central business district in Lhasa, it is lined with stores instead of prayer wheels. Locals and tourists come here to shop, and then circumambulate the Jokhang Monastery, which

indicates the start of each day. Therefore, *bar skor* is a mixed area midway between religious and mundane life.

I walked on *bar skor* several times; it is about 900 m long. There are more people who choose to do full body prostration on this path than other places. When I asked some pilgrims about the reason why, they told me that they believe it can gain the most merit to do it here; and even more can be gained if they do it in the Jokhang Monastery, but they cannot because of the crowds of people in there. So *bar skor* is place which well maximizes the balance between practical feasibility and the merit pilgrims can gain.

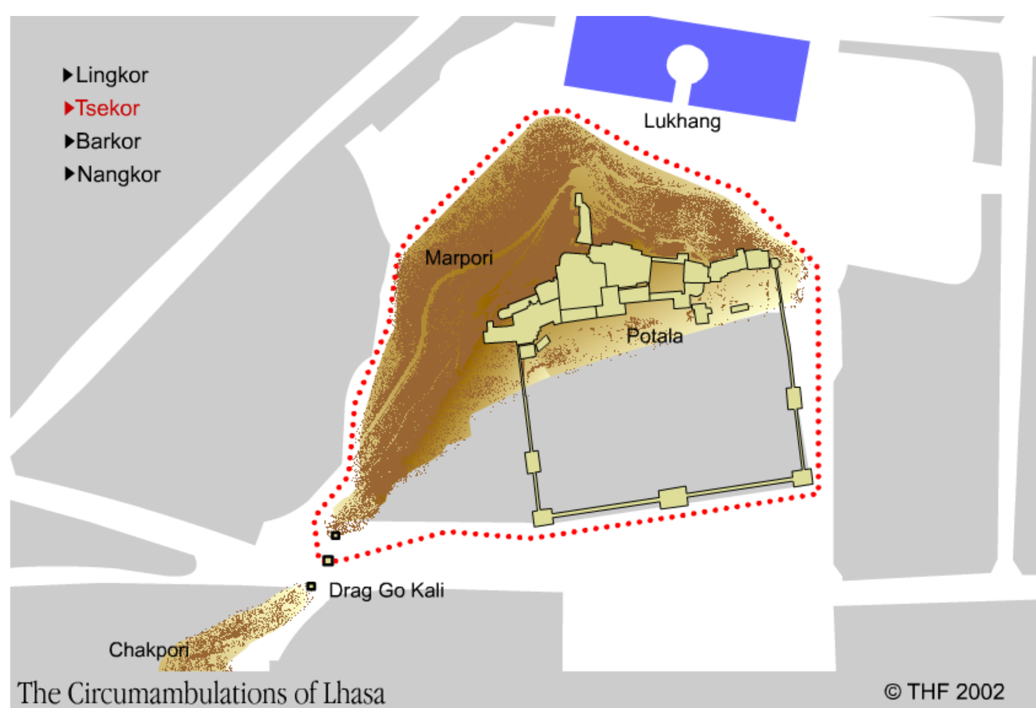


Map 6. Bar Skor. Source: Tibetan Heritage Fund.

Rtse Skor

The third circumambulation is *rtze skor* ‘top path’, it is the path around the Potala Palace, running alongside with the highest numbers of prayer wheels in Lhasa. It gets its name

because the Potala Palace is built on the top of Mapori Hill and was the highest building in Lhasa (Zhang 2006: 58-61). In my observations of Lhasa, there are more Han Chinese who circumambulate here than other places, especially after dinner. I asked some of them about their reasons for circumambulating, and they replied that they regarded it as exercise after a meal and because of the beautiful scenery, instead of any religious meaning.



Map 7. Rtze Skor. Source: Tibetan Heritage Fund.

Gling Skor

The fourth and the longest circumambulation is *gling skor* 'continent path' or *phyi skor* 'outer path'. It is an 8 km-long path around the central area of Lhasa including most of the Potala Palace, Jokhang Monastery, and other sacred sites (Zhang 2006: 49-51). It usually takes three or four hours to circumambulate it. Generally, people who walk this path are elders who have much time and do not need to work. However, during the *Saga Dawa* festival in April of the

Tibetan calendar, this path abounds with people, including locals and pilgrims from other parts of Tibet. The whole month passes in circumambulation.

Map 8. Gling Skor. Source: Tibetan Heritage Fund.

Stod Skor and Smud Skor

The fifth and sixth circumambulation paths, *stod skor* 'up path' and *smud skor* 'low path', are actually variants of *gling skor*. Hu Sheng Zhang firstly describes them in his doctoral dissertation (Zhang 2006: 61-63). From the middle line of *gling skor*, namely the Kang Ang Duo Road, the east part is *stod skor* and the west part is *smud skor*. It derives from the direction of flow of the Lhasa River or *kyichu* (*kyichu*) in Tibetan, which flows from east to west. Hence the east is upstream and the west is downstream (Zhang 2006: 62). These two paths are for people who do not have time or energy to circumambulate *gling skor*.

Sacred Monasteries

In Buddhism, there are three important elements, called *triratna*, the ‘Three Jewels’. These are Buddha, ‘the enlightened one’, meaning Shakyamuni or Buddhahood; Dharma, ‘the teaching’, meaning the teaching of Buddha and the path to enlightenment; and Sangha, ‘the community’, meaning the community of Buddhist practitioners, namely the monks and nuns (Zhao 1993: 8). Taking refuge in the Three Jewels is regarded as the symbol of being a formal Buddhist. In Tibetan Buddhism, there is a fourth jewel, the guru, which is Tibetan Buddhists’ personal instructor who can give Tantric teaching. The place which has all Three Jewels is the monastery, so the initial Jokhang Monastery was actually just a chapel. Currently, according to the Chinese government, there are about 1,700 monasteries in Tibet (Chinese Government White Paper, 2008). Each one of them is a sacred center in Tibet.

The Jokhang Monastery is regarded as the most sacred monastery because of its Buddha Jewel, Jowo Rinpoche, the life-sized statue of Buddha at age twelve (see Figure 8). It is believed that the statue was modeled from Shakyamuni himself when he was still alive (Lu 2001: 23-44). Therefore, Tibetan people consider seeing the statue as equal to seeing the Buddha in person. They donate their precious jewels to add to the ostentatious clothes of the statue and gilding it. It usually costs 350 RMB (about 60 CAD) to gild its face, and 7000 RMB (about 1200 CAD) to gild its full body and the faces of nearby deities. Those who gild the statue have the privilege of circumambulating the statue closely, empowering their amulets by touching the statue (Zhang 2006: 69). Huber also states this: “The closer one is to this ideal centre the stronger the empowerment potential. This has consequences for the ordering of space, and in all cases centrality and relative height are given priority over periphery and relative lowness (Huber 1993: 29).”

Figure 8. Statue of Jowo Rinpoche. Source: Kagyu Media Lab.

At a place in front of the gate of Jokhang Monastery, pilgrims constantly do full body prostration (see Figure 9), by which the floor has become polished over time. The highest sacredness of Jokhang Monastery derives from this symbolic incarnation of Buddha. I observed people doing full body prostrations there several times, one man attracting my attention because he was a Han Chinese. After talking, he told me the whole ritual is to do full body prostration 111,111 times, and he can do it 2,000 times per day. The reason he was doing this was to heal his cardiac disease; before he did this he had tried *qi gong* and other practices, but there were no results. When he accepted his friend's advice and performed full body prostration at the Jokhang Monastery, he felt much better, even though he was not a Tibetan Buddhist.

Figure 9. Pilgrims do full body prostration in front of Jokhang Monastery. Photo by the author, 2012.

Another type of monastery models the Buddhist cosmology and the symbol of the mandala. The mandala is reproduced constantly in Tibetan culture, as Huber states:

> This [mandala] takes place in multiple ephemeral constructions, such as ritual and gestures, the positioning of persons in certain ceremonial and performative events, the heaped arrangement of grains and other offering substances in regular rituals or the sustained and highly detailed mental productions generated in advanced forms of Tantric meditation. (Huber 1993: 49)

The permanent mandala is the architectural form like monastery. A representative example is the Samye Monastery in Lhoka prefecture, 200 km southeast of Lhasa (see Figure 10). It was the first monastery, in strict definition, namely having the Three Jewels. It was established by the second religious king, Trisong Detson, under the supervision of Padmasambhava in the 8th century. The architecture of the Smaye Monastery is based on the design of Odantapuri

Monastery in Bihar, India (Huang 2010: 66-67). According to the Tibetan text *sab bzhed* (*sap zhé*), which specifically recorded the building process of the Samye Monastery, its main chapel symbolizes Mount Meru and the chapels surrounding it symbolize the four continents and eight subcontinents. To be specific, the eastern three chapels in half-circle shape symbolize Purvavideha, Videhas, and Dehas; the south three chapels in scapula-shape symbolize Jambudvipa, Chamaras and Avaracamaras; the west three chapels in circular shape symbolize Godaniya, Uttaramantrins and Shathas; and the north three chapels in triangular shape symbolize Uttarakuru, Kurus, and Kauravas. In addition, the sun chapel and the moon chapel symbolize the Sun and the Moon. Finally, the outer wall symbolizes the Ring of Iron Mountains (Huang 2010: 69-70). Therefore, the Samye Monastery expresses the universe in architectural form. After construction was completed, seven Tibetans received Buddhist monastic ordination and constituted the first sangha in Tibet (Huang 2010: 75-76). Over time, some particular buildings have been destroyed. Since its restoration, the Samye Monastery still keeps the basic shape of a mandala, though some details have been lost. In its three-storied main chapel, there is corridor on each floor for circumambulation. When people circumambulate this cosmological type of monastery, they can visualize that they circumambulate the world, and hence maximize merit both spiritually and symbolically.

Figure 10. Samye Monastery. Source: Tibet China Travel Service.

Chapter IV. Prayer Wheels as Micro Circuit

Prayer wheels or praying wheels are the wheel-shape ritualistic instruments for worship in many religions like Hinduism, Brahmanism, and Buddhism. However, they have not been in active use outside of Tibet and Mongolia since the 19th century (Simpson 1896: 32). To my knowledge, the first monograph to focus on prayer wheels is *The Buddhist Praying-Wheel,* written by William Simpson in 1896. His interest was first aroused by the prayer wheels he saw in Tibet; he then started to collect data on wheels and circular movement in different cultures. Due to limitations of time, some of his descriptions are outdated and presumptions are oversimplified; however, he still made a big contribution to this research subject and gave a direction for future researchers.

In the time of Simpson, the Buddhist praying wheel had not gained serious attention; people talked of it as a jokingly as “rotatory calabash” (Simpson 1896:4). Simpson states that the name “praying wheel” was a misnomer because it is not an instrument for praying; instead, it is for praising because the mantra carved on its outer surface, *om mani padme hum* means ‘adoration to the Jewel in the Lotus, amen!’(Simpson 1896: 28). He argued that the mantra has often been misrepresented as a prayer, and therefore “praising wheel” would be a more appropriate name than prayer wheel (Simpson 1896: 26-27). No matter which name is more accurate in English, the Tibetan term for prayer wheel, *mani chos khor* (*mani chö kor*) literally means ‘precious dharma wheel’. Most Tibetan people do not know the meaning of the mantra or the history of the prayer wheel; they just rotate it for merit. For them, the prayer wheel is just an instrument to gain more merit no matter whether the original purpose was prayer or praise.

In terms of the origin of the prayer wheel, Simpson assumed that it has a solar origin because of its rotatory direction and description in ancient Indian sacred texts. In *Satapatha Brahmana* and *Grihya-Sutras*, *pradakshina*, a Sanskrit term for circumambulation, must be performed from left to right—going round with the right side to the sacred center—namely the sun's course (Simpson 1896: 92-93). In addition, Simpson finds that sunwise direction is universal in many circular movements of different cultures; it means the right movement, and the reverse direction will lead to bad results (Simpson 1896: 75-77, 88, 97), but there are still exceptions of anti-sunwise movement like *twarf* , a circumambulation performed by Muslims, and also in Bon. As for the Tibetan prayer wheels, Simpson had no direct evidence to prove the solar origin, but he stated that Buddhists borrowed the wheel from the Brahmans, so Tibetan Buddhism may also have borrowed prayer wheels and solar symbolism (Simpson 1896: 94).

According to *Mani Kabum* (*mani kabum*), a Tibetan Buddhist text written in the late 11th century which focuses on the practice of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, Nagarjuna, a famous Indian Buddhist philosopher in the 2nd century, gave the prayer wheel practice to Lion-faced Dakini, then she gave it to Padmasambhava, who brought it into Tibet with Buddhism in the 7th century (Lama Zopa Rinpoche 1994). Ekvall also mentions that the earliest known reference to a prayer wheel is said to occur in a biography of Milarepa named *Songs of Mi La* in the early 11th century (Ekvall 1964: 122). I have been unable to more fully answer this question, which still needs more archaeological and textual study; at least in terms of portable prayer wheels, one Tibetan archaeologist named Shag Wangdu I interviewed said that they have not found any trace of it in archaeological sites, and he assumes it may have come from China not long ago.

Unlike the flat wheel-shaped praying wheels previously used in India, the Tibetan prayer wheel is a cylindrical wheel on a spindle made from metal, stone, wood, leather, or coarse cotton, usually decorated with carnelian, turquoise, and other jewels. On its outer surface is carved the mantra of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva *om mani padme hum*, and inside the prayer wheel is one of various sutras (see Figure 12). There is also a heavy pendant chained to the cylinder, and this is what allows it to be rotated easily by twisting one's wrist. The size of prayer wheels varies from tiny finger-size ones to giant ones more than 20 m high, the one I bought in Lhasa for about 80 CAD (see Figure 11) is 30 cm tall and 1 kg in weight; the cylinder is made of bronze with carnelian and turquoise on its surface, the handle is made of wood and bone. There is no mantra carved on the surface, but it has a roll of script on which *om mani padme hum* is repeatedly written inside the cylinder (see Figure 12). People believe that rotating one circle of the prayer wheel is equal to one recitation of the mantra or the sutra within it. The seller told me that it is from western Tibet and is about 100 years old. I do not quite believe it because the generality of fake antiques in Tibet, especially the things sold to tourists like me.

Figure 11. Outer appearance of prayer wheel. Photo by the author, 2014.

Figure 12. Inner script of prayer wheel. Photo by the author, 2014.

As for the dynamic nature of prayer wheels, traditionally they are powered manually, or by natural forces like fire, wind, and water. People believe that the wind which moves the prayer wheels will benefit the places where it blows; the water which moves the prayer wheel will

benefit the places where it flows. Depending on the local environment and budget, people choose different prayer wheels. In one monastery around Lake Manasarovar, I even found a wind prayer wheel which uses recycled bowls of noodle soup to move it (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Noodle soup wind prayer wheel. Photo by the author, 2012.

With the development of technology, electronic prayer wheels, prayer wheel DVDs and prayer wheel software have appeared (see Figure 14). There are two types of software prayer wheels: one is a program that spins prayer wheels automatically; the other is a 3D touchscreen model of a prayer wheel you need to swipe the screen to rotate. Additionally, some programs have counter to count the times of the prayer wheels have been spun, and play the record of the mantra *om mani padme hum* while spinning. Some Buddhists may

doubt the power of these new prayer wheels; however, some lamas and rinpoches acknowledged that these new prayer wheels have the same effectiveness as traditional ones.

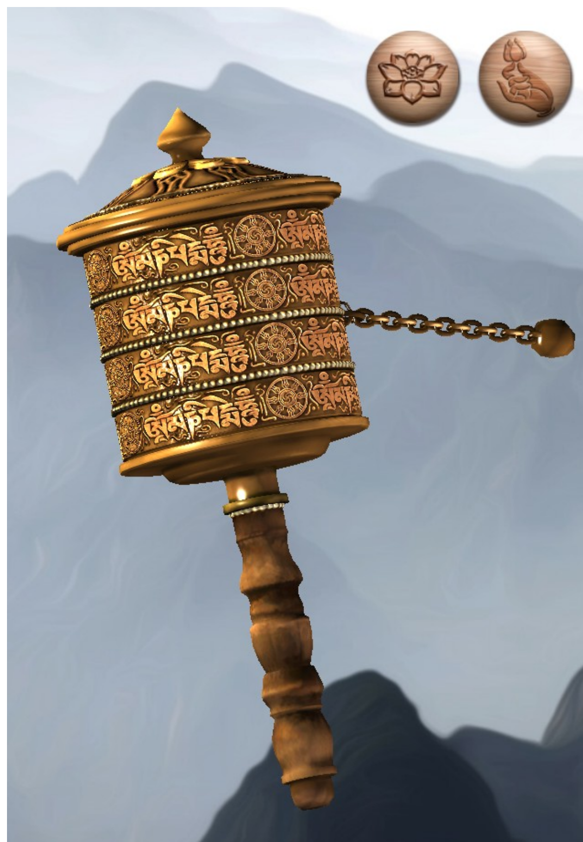


Figure 14. The application “Prayer Wheel 3D” on iPhone. Screenshot by the author, 2014.

In terms of how to use prayer wheels, according to Simpson’s book, a lama taught him how to rotate the prayer wheels properly:

> Before turning these wheels, the performer should repeat the Mantra, else he will derive no merit from it; while he is turning, he may repeat the words as often as possible, and at the end a repetition is necessary, or the whole of the performance will be useless. The wheel should be moved round in the direction that a person would go if he turned round an object with his right hand to the centre. To turn the wheel in the other direction produces an evil result; and, if I mistake not, such a

> motion is believed to undo any merit that had been previously produced by turning it in the right manner. (Simpson 1896: 28-29)

Although Simpson's description was made more than 100 years ago, nowadays Tibetan people still follow this turning way, except for Bon believers who rotate it in reverse. In addition, some technologies I mentioned earlier have changed the way people use prayer wheels.

Tibetan people usually rotate the prayer wheels to gain benevolent karma and avoid malevolent karma. Karma is a core concept in Buddhism, being actions or deeds that cause samsara. It can be divided into benevolent karma and malevolent karma. All the karma is made by body, speech, and mind. There are ten malevolent karmas in the Vinaya, the Buddhist discipline: killing, stealing, and unlawful sexual intercourse are made by the body; lying, slander, rudeness, and foolish babble are made by the speech; greed, hatred, and delusion are made by the mind and are considered the three root karma that lead to pain and unenlightenment (Nyanatiloka 1980: 150). To avoid the malevolent karma and gain merit, people need to self-cultivate through body, speech, and mind. Rotating a prayer wheel is a practice that can simultaneously engage the three parts in virtue: rotating the prayer wheels with the body, reciting the mantra of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva by speech, and performing particular contemplation and visualization by mind (Ladner 2000: 6). Because of its convenience for everyone, including the illiterate and people who are unable to speak, some pious Tibetans rotate the prayer wheel as often as they possibly can[15], especially elders. Some of them told me they treat it as a part of their life, like eating and sleeping. Relatively, young Tibetans do not rotate them as often as elders; they prefer turning stationary prayer wheels

[15] However, during the period in Lhasa, I seldom saw the lamas rotate prayer wheels. It may because they can gain more merit through Tantric practice and their destination is the Buddhahood instead of painless samsara.

during circumambulation or using electronic prayer wheels; I found many drivers put them in their cars to pray for safety when I was in Tibet.

In my opinion, the factors deciding the merit gained by rotating prayer wheels are: size, time and number. The portable ones can be brought everywhere, and though they are small, people can rotate them for a long time when they are free, and hence accumulate merit for the duration of rotation. The gigantic ones are usually found in particular shrines; for that they are called *mani lha khang* (*mani la kang*) 'shrine of prayer wheel', and people accumulate merit from their significant power. For example, the largest prayer wheel, in Zhong Dian County, Yunnan Province, is 21 m tall and weighs 60 tons. It is said that turning it one full rotation equals reciting the mantra 1,240,000 times.

Rotating different times of prayer wheels will gain different merit, according to *Mani 'khor lo'I phan yon* (*mani kor lo pen yön*) '*The Benefits of the Mani Wheel*', a typical Tibetan work on the mantra, rotating prayer wheels different numbers of times has varied benefits:

> The benefit of turning the [prayer] wheel once is equal to reading the translation of the [India] treatises (*bstan 'gyur* [*ten gyur*]) once. Turning it twice is equal to reading the words of the Conqueror [the Buddha] once. Turning it three times purifies the obstructions of body, speech, and mind. Turning it ten times purifies sins equal to Mount Meru. Turning it one hundred times makes one equal to the king of dharma Yama [the Lord of Death]. Turning it one thousand times, one understands the meaning of the dharmakāma for one's own welfare. Turning it ten thousand times, one brings about the welfare of oneself and other sentient beings. Turning it one hundred thousand times, one is reborn in the retinue of

> Avalokiteśvara. Turning it ten million times, the sentient beings of the six realms attain the ocean of bliss. (Lopez 1998: 130)

Rotating many prayer wheels at one time could also gain more merit, like the large number of stationary prayer wheels along the circumambulatory paths of the monasteries. For instance, the circumambulatory path around the Potala Palace has 1,836 prayer wheels (Zhang 2006: 84, see Figure 15), people told me they believe the prayer wheels there are more powerful and they can get more merit by rotating them.

Figure 15. Stationary prayer wheels around the Potala Palace. Photo by the author, 2012.

By comparing with circumambulation, I argue that rotating a prayer wheel is similar to circumambulation for the following reasons. First, a prayer wheel is *gnas* in Tibetan thinking; thus it has the same sacredness as landscapes, monasteries, etc. Second, rotating the prayer wheels shares the same ritual model as circumambulation, namely, circular movement around a sacred center. In circumambulation, it is the person who walks around the sacred center on

foot, while in rotating a prayer wheel, the pendant on the outer surface of portable ones, or the cylinder of stationary ones can be regarded as a symbol of the person. In this way, prayer wheels can be seen as “spinning on behalf of the one who walks” (Ekvall 1964: 233). To be more exact, rotating prayer wheels is a circumrotation around sacred center. Third, people usually rotate the prayer wheels while circumambulating to enhance merit, especially in the case of stationary prayer wheels which must be rotated by walking people. In Lhasa, I observed that a group of old women rotated the stationary prayer wheels around the Potala Palace while circumambulating. When they took a rest in the middle, they took out their portable prayer wheels from bags and started to rotate them. After about 10 minutes, they went back to circumambulating and spinning the stationary ones. Thus I consider that rotating the prayer wheels without walking can be regarded as a substitute or continuance of circumambulation.

Chapter V. Interpretation of Circumambulation in Tibet

From ethnographic accounts of circumambulation in Tibet, we know the specific expression of varied types of circumambulation. To interpret these, I would extract two core factors: the first is the concept of sacredness, and the second is the symbolic meaning of the circle and circular movement. Thus, I propose a model of circumambulation in Tibet to understand it more fully.

The Concept of Sacredness in Tibetan Culture

Human beings have a natural fear of the unknown and they tend to deify or demonize the unknown to deal with this fear. Some people worship nature, such as the sun, animals, and landscapes. Edward Tylor named this belief "animism" to emphasize the role of the soul (Tylor 1920: 23). Tibetan religions are not monotheistic, and Tibetan people have kept the concept of animism, thus making the Tibetan pantheon complicated and multifarious. As I mentioned before, Bon is animistic and polytheistic—wind, thunder, hail, mountain, lake, animal, house, all are considered to have souls and therefore are cultivated as people's objects of worship (Liu 2008: 116). Tibetan Buddhism has absorbed most of these and turns them into the Buddhist pantheon.

In the Tibetan context, this animism, called *bla*, the 'vitality' or 'life-power' principle, is an indigenous notion which relates to the conceptions both of person and of place" (Huber 1993: 16). This *bla* exists in *gnas*, which is translated most often as 'place' ('lieu', 'Platz') and less often as 'locality' and 'site' in Western sources. The concept of *gnas* carries "the meaning 'to exist', 'to be', 'reside' or 'abide', 'to stay' or 'remain', and even 'condition [of existence]'"

(Huber 1993: 14). Tibetans believe that "the physical environment in both its animate and inanimate dimensions is occupied by a host of deities and spirits forces" (Huber 1993: 15), and thus the physical environment becomes *gnas*. In addition, *bla* does not just reside in the physical landscapes like mountains and lakes, it also lives in the human body, other living organisms such as animals and trees, and in things like stones (Huber 1993: 16). The *gnas,* including landscape, monasteries, people, and so on, where *bla* resides within, is sacred in Tibet, and thus the *bla* makes them become the objects for circumambulation. In the Tibetan context, *gnas* is a form the *bla* exists in, and a relation between *bla* and people, rather than a physical concept of the "place" in English, is the relationship Tibetans usually recognize between people and the world.

Although there are many divine dyads in the Tibetan pantheon, there is no absolute binary opposition—goodness and evilness—in the concept of sacredness. In other words, it is not only the gods and goodness that are the objects of worship, but also the demons known as *dregs pa* (*drek pa*) and *dreg pa pho mo* (*drek pa po mo*). The landscape of the Tibetan Plateau is considered to be a supine *srin mo* (*sin mo*) 'demoness'. The *srin* are fierce indigenous evil spirits and were later identified with the Indian *rakshasa* (Gyatso 1989: 35). Tibetan Buddhist texts said that people are the descendants of a holy macaque and a *rakshasi* 'female *rakshasa*', namely the *srin mo* (Gyaltsen 2000: 30-32). This ambiguity of goodness and evilness in the concept of sacredness does not conflict with Tibetan Buddhism. By contrast, Tibetan Buddhism absorbed these demons and employed them as the protectors of dharma because of their wrath and ferocity. Unlike the peaceful-looking deities in Mahayana tradition, the same deities appear in wrathful forms in the Tantric tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. These wrathful demons and deities in wrathful forms are more popular and are worshipped more. The representative example is *Palden Lhamo* (*paden lamo*), the protector

of the Dalai Lama, the Gelukpa and Lhasa, who is the wrathful incarnation of the goddess *Shri Devi* in Hinduism. According to the iconographic compendium known as the *Rin byung* (*rin jung*), one form of *Palden Lhamo* is as follows:

> […] the goddess is of a dark-blue hue, has one face, two hands, and rides on a mule. With her right hand she brandishes a huge sandal-wood club adorned with a thunderbolt and with her left hand she holds in front of her breast the blood-filled skull of a child, born out of an incestuous union. She wears a flowing garment of black silk and a loin-cloth made of a rough material. Her ornaments are a diadem of skulls, a garland of freshly-cut heads, a girdle of snake, and bone ornaments, and her whole body is covered with the ashes of cremated corpses. She has three eyes, bares her fangs, and her hair on her head stands on end. A *khram shing* [*tram shing*][16] is stuck into her girdle and she carries a sack full of diseases and a pair of dice. Above her head is a panoply of peacock-feathers. In her retinue appear countless *bdud* [*dü*][17], black birds, black dogs and black sheep. (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996: 25)

Besides their symbolic meanings, the horrible weapons and decorations of wrathful protective deities can enhance their power. Similarly, offerings to them are also horrible, and can include human blood, organs, and other objects (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996: 343-345). For this kind of deities, wrath and ferocity are features that need to be maintained and strengthened rather than subdued. The more wrathful they are, the more power they have, and the more helpful for the protection of Buddhism. The wrathful deities are also common in mundane affairs like summoning rain, removing the curses, healing illness, and so forth. This

[16] The plate used for catching ghosts.
[17] Demons.

concept may derive from the extremely harsh environment of Tibet in which productivity is low. Therefore, a concept of using wrath to defeat wrath has formed. This concept is widely employed in witchcraft, magic, and sorcery. For example, in the heavily forested part of southwestern China, indigenous minorities believed in *gu*, which is a kind of witchcraft involving poisonous creatures. Putting many poisonous insects and animals such as spiders, scorpions, snakes, and centipedes into a sealed urn to let them kill each other, the last one surviving is called *gu*. It is believed that this *gu* has omnipotent power like deities, and feeding it poisonous objects can enhance its power (Deng 1999: 52-59). Tantric Buddhism has survived and flourished in Tibet, whereas in other places it was considered non-Buddhism and was eradicated, like in China and India. I think this ambiguity of sacredness is perhaps one reason.

Following the introduction of Buddhism, many indigenous concepts of sacredness have been absorbed into Buddhism by the process of "Buddhicisation". Toni Huber has given a good summary of the two main methods of this process:

> […] [There are] two principal sources of authority to identify sacred sources. The main type is visionary authority, based upon "pure visions" (*dag-snang* [*dak nang*]) of particular landscapes experiences by Tantric lamas in altered states of consciousness, during meditations, dreams and so forth. The "gap" which exists between a pilgrims' mundane experience of a holy place and the splendored *dag-snang* type visionary accounts of an environment's sublime features and properties is technically explained by authors in terms of traditional theories of graded perceptions and cognitive abilities which are related to an individual's karmic (i.e. moral) status, degrees of embodied psycho-physical defilement (*sgrib-gnyis* [*drip*

> *nyi*]) and thus their extent of spiritual progress towards awakening. The second type is prophetic authority in the form of citation and analysis of "prophecies" (*lung-btsan* [*lung tsen*]) reputedly made by Buddhas, deities, recognised saints or highly realized lamas about the identity of particular holy places. (Huber 1997: 306)

Through visualization and prophecy, many territorial deities have become Buddhist deities. Although the attribution of sacredness has changed, their nature has not. By relating the particular topographical forms to great historical events, they are regarded as the results of these events: magic battles, struggles of powers, and so forth. Therefore, places and objects in the natural environment are empowered by the presence and actions of the deities and saints, and so obtain sacredness (Huber 1997: 121). For example, on the circumambulation path around Mount Kailash, there is a stone which is considered sacred because it was used in the magical contest between Milarepa and Na Ro Bon Chuang. The pattern of relationship between the sacred objects and people, and the method of how people deal with this relationship, form the concept of sacredness in Tibet.

Symbolic Meaning of the Circle and Circular Movement

People's relationship with sacredness is moderated through worship. Different cultures have varied ways to worship; among them, prostration is widespread. It is essentially a way to elevate the divinity and subordinate the humanity in order to emphasize the gap between god and human. In Tibetan society, besides the prostration, Tibetans go on pilgrimage or circumambulate sacred objects to worship and form certain relationships with a *gnas*. They use different ways to achieve this aim, as Huber states:

> Mental and physical acts structure this relationship at various levels, which can involve types of representational synthesis and identification (by visualization/mediation), and a host of actual physical contacts, both those that are tangible and others that are believed to be sublime. Most commonly it is about a direct (and observable) physical, sensory relationship of person and place through *seeing* (in both the sense of direct encounter and "reading" and interpreting landscape, etc.), *touching* (by contacting the place), positioning (body in relation to place), *consuming/tasting* (by ingesting place substance), *collecting* (substances of the place), *exchanging* (place substance with personal substances/possessions), *vocalizing* (prayers addressed to the place or specific formulas), and eve in some cases *listening* (for sounds produced by the place). (Huber 1993: 24-25)

All the acts Huber mentions are done by people while they circumambulate sacred objects. However, why do Tibetans choose this circular movement over other forms?

Geometrically, the circle is a round planar figure whose boundary consists of points equidistant from a fixed point, namely the center of circle. It is a natural shape that can readily be found in nature, such as the sun and the moon. Therefore, ancient beliefs are often connected with circles: Stonehenge, Tai Chi, and so forth. The mythology of sun deities is so prevalent around the world that Max Müller argues, "The whole of mythology is solar" (cited in Lang 1897: xxii). Furthermore, the circle as a symbol also indicates the worldview of particular cultures. For instance, consider the example of the Oglala Lakota, a Native American people, in Paul Radin's work, as cited by Clifford Geertz:

> The Oglala believe the circle to be sacred because the great spirit caused everything in nature to be round except stone. Stone is the implement of destruction. The sun and the sky, the earth and the moon are round like a shield, though the sky is deep like a bowl. Everything that breathes is round like the stem of a plant. Since the great spirit has caused everything to be round mankind should look upon the circle as sacred, for it is the symbol of all things in nature except stone. It is also the symbol of the circle that makes the edge of the world and therefore of the four winds that travel there. Consequently it is also the symbol of the year. The day, the night, and the moon go in a circle above the sky. Therefore the circle is symbol of these divisions of time and hence the symbol of all time.
>
> For these reasons the Oglala make their tipis circular, their camp-circle circular, and sit in a circle at all ceremonies. The circle is also the symbol of the tipi and shelter. If one makes a circle for an ornament and it is not divided in any way, it should be understood as the symbol of the world and of time. (Geertz 1973: 128)

Similarly, artificial structures as well as natural objects serve as the center of the universe and human life. In Mongolian culture, the round yurt is considered to be not only the cosmic center, but also a microcosm in itself, a concentration of all the traditions of the country and a miniature representation of the cosmos. It is a remarkably round world ordered in time and space, where everything falls in to place. The movements in the yurt accord with the course of the sun, namely clockwise (Mauvieux, Reinberg, and Touitou 2014: 152-154). Just so, the Tibetan prayer wheel expresses the core sacred concept and circumambulation in miniature, as I discussed earlier.

In Tibetan context, its worldview is based on the Buddhist worldview, in which the world is a wheel consisting of six realms: the human realm, the heavenly realm, the realm of strife and conflict (*asura* realm), the realm of animals, the realm of hell, and the realm of frustrated craving (*preta* or 'hungry ghosts'). People will be reborn in various realms depending on their varied karma (Lama Anagarika Govinda 1973: 234-247). This is known as the samsara, the wheel of death and rebirth, and is expressed vividly in the murals of monasteries and *thangkas*. The first three realms are considered the three benevolent realms, and the latter three are the malevolent realms. Among the three benevolent realms, although the heavenly realm is painless, it is not as interesting as the human realm, and the *asura* realm is filled with conflict. Common Tibetan people wish to be born again in the human realm by accumulating merit. For practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, their ultimate goal is to archive the enlightenment and escape samsara.

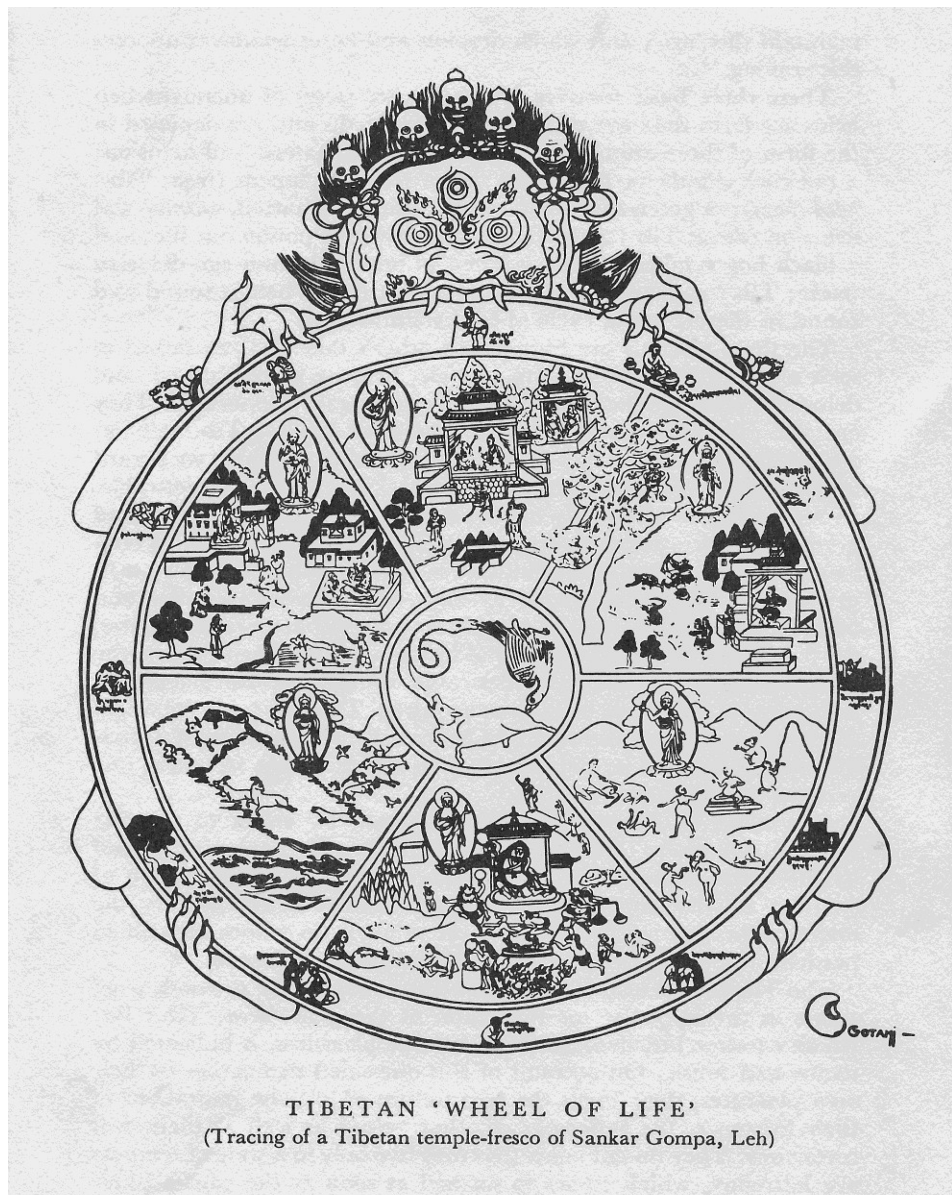


Figure 16. Tibetan Wheel of Life. Source: Lama Anagarika Govinda 1973.

In the center of the wheel of life, there are three animals symbolizing the three malevolent karmas made by the mind: greed, hatred and delusion, which are considered the root motives of unenlightenment and the samsara. The three animals bite each other's tails and are connected with each other, thus forming a circle again because greed, hatred and delusion are inseparably linked (Lama Anagarika Govinda 1973: 238). The outer rims features the twelve dependent originations in one lifetime, from blindness to death; these causes and effects, along with the three mind karma, lead to suffering and are the dynamic of the wheel of life

that make it rotate endlessly. This circular worldview indicates the Tibetan view of life: it is circular and endless instead of linear. This is one reason why Tibetans spend much time to performing religious practice.

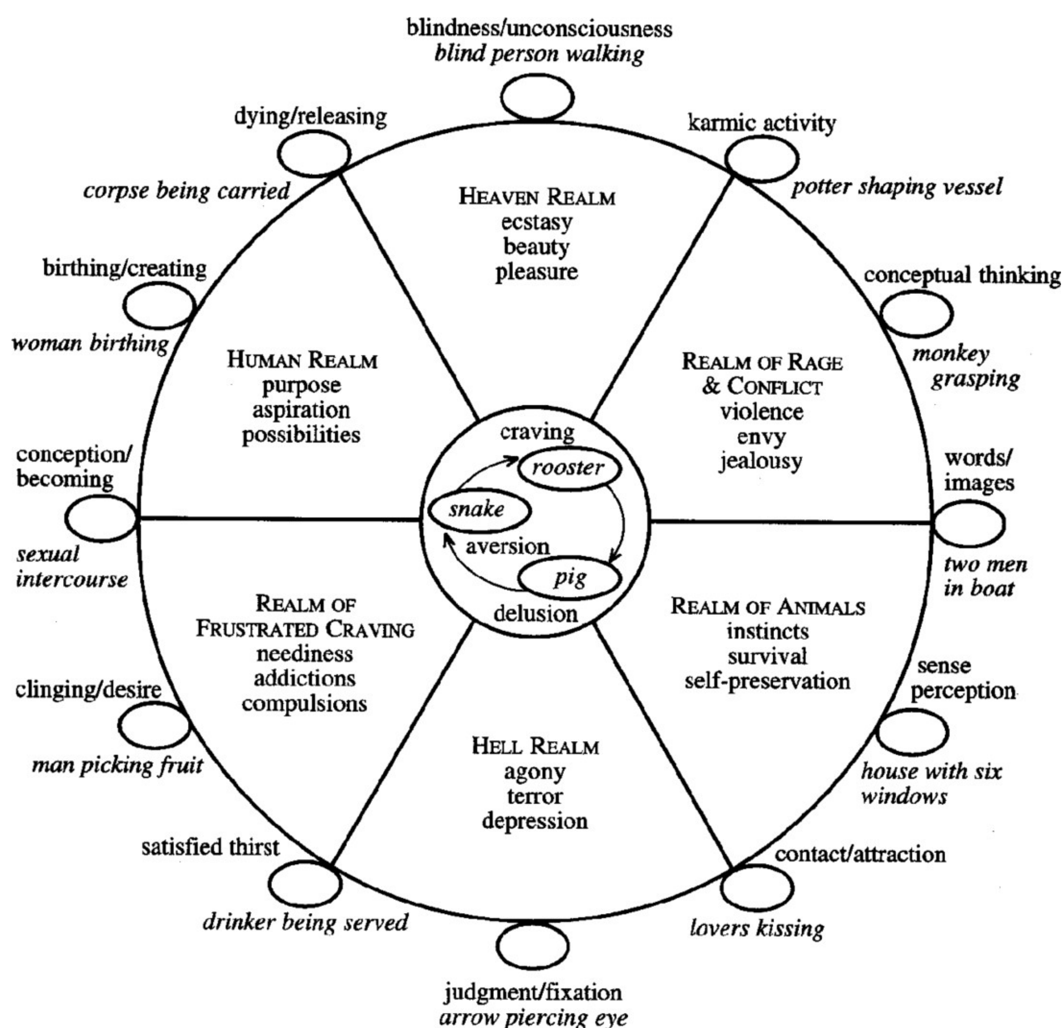


Figure 17. Symbols and Meaning of Wheel of Life. Source: Kafka-metamorphosis.

Similarly, the concept of time in Tibet is also circular. Unlike the Gregorian calendar, which is linear, the Tibetan calendar has a 60-year cycle, similar to the Chinese sexagenary cycle. It combines the 12 animals—rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey rooster, dog, pig, rat, ox and tiger—and five elements—fire, earth, iron, water, and wood—and each year also has a gender. For example, 2012 is male water dragon year, 2013 is female water snake year, 2014 is male wood horse year, 2015 is female wood goat year, and so forth.

In terms of the relationship between symbolic meaning and its external expression, Geertz commented on the circle in Oglala Lakota culture that the symbolic meanings of circle “once abstracted, can then be employed for ritual purposes (Geertz 1973: 128).” There are some geometric characteristics of a circle: if a person started to walk from one point along circumference of a circle, eventually he will return to the starting point, and there is never an end; a circle is a closed figure without any blemish; a circle is flexible without any angles. In my opinion, the symbolic meanings of all these characteristics in the context of Tibetan culture are endlessness, recurrence, perfection, and adaptation, which are expressed by its worldview, material culture, and activities performed in a circular fashion. Circular routes in pilgrimage do not necessarily form the shape of a perfect circle, but they consist of a closed traverse (Stoddard 1997: 52). In the Tibetan context, circumambulation is the ritual way to express the circle. Although they are not always geometrically perfect circles in reality, they must be closed loops; this is one basic rule of all circular rituals and symbols, as Ekvall states: “Nothing has been gained if the full circuit has not been completed” (Ekvall 1964: 233).

Besides the worldview I presented earlier, material culture, including architecture and paintings, are the concretization of this circular worldview. For example, the sand mandalas, these are delicate models made of colorful sands by lamas before Tantric practices which can offer protection and help with visualization (Hou 2011: 34). They usually take three or four day to make and are destroyed once the practice is completed to symbolize the concept of emptiness in Buddhism. Sand mandalas are a combination of art and ritual indicating the circular nature of Buddhist cosmology and philosophy.

In Tibetan meditation, there are seven psychic centers in the human body, known as *chakras* ‘wheel of power’ in Hinduism. They are located in the brain, middle of the eyebrow, throat,

heart, upper abdomen, lower abdomen, and tailbone (Lama Anagarika Govinda 1973: 140-146). By the spinning of these *chakras*, energy circulates in the human body. It is considered the natural way that energy moves in nature. Therefore, Tibetans perform circular movements to adapt this natural flow of energy in order to be maximally empowered.

Tibetan people use the form of circular movement to establish their relationships with space, time, and sacredness, and also express them in visual forms of material and non-material culture. Even when they make *tsamba*, using fingers to stir yak butter tea and fried hulless barley in bowls, the direction of stirring is clockwise (Ekvall 1964: 235). The core element they strive for is the circular form, rather than specific methods to do circular movement. For example, although according to Buddhist texts, they must walk during pilgrimage, which is said can obtain more merit (Buffetrille 2004: 2), some people actually ride horses or drive automobiles to circumambulate the sacred objects, as I observed in Tibet. This fact also expresses the symbolic meaning of adoption.

A Concentric Circle Model of Circumambulation in Tibet

Through discussion of the sacredness and symbolic meaning of circular movement, which are the two core elements of circumambulation, I have identified the crucial aspects of circumambulation in its varied forms of expression, hence establishing a concentric circle model around a sacred center. In Tibetan society, the highest sacredness is Buddha. Different scales of circumambulation form the concentric circles around this utmost sacred center.

Using the structure of the solar system as an analogy, the planets and other objects move around the Sun because of its gravitation; each planet has a moon or moons moving around it

because of gravitation of their own. According to Newton's law of universal gravitation, every particle in the universe attracts every other particle with a force that is directly proportional to be the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them (Serway and Jewett 2010: 375). To be specific, the Sun attracts the Earth to move around it with its significant gravitation coming from its significant mass, and the Moon moves around the Earth rather than being attracted by the Sun because it is a short distance from the Earth, although the gravitation of the Earth is much less than the Sun's.

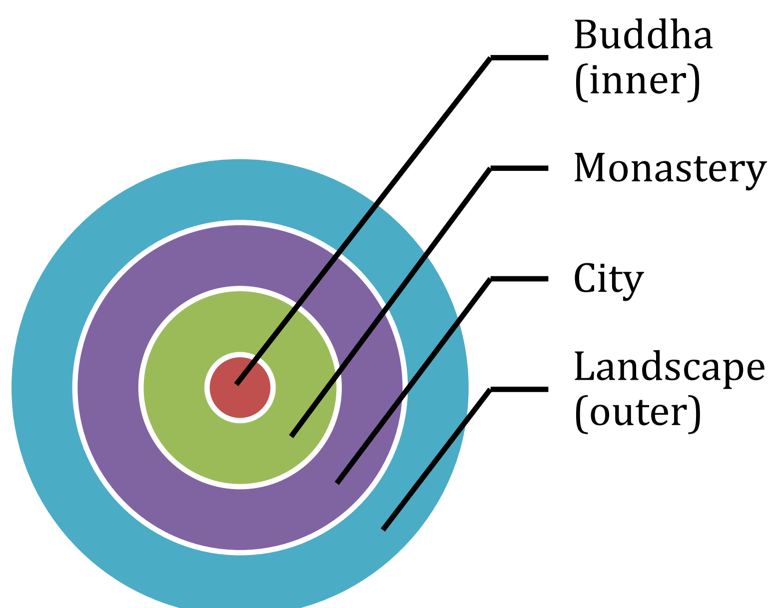


Figure 18. Concentric Circle Model of Circumambulation in Tibet. Made by the author, 2013.

In the concentric circle model of circumambulation in Tibet, the circle's center is Buddha or the nature of Buddha. In concretized form, it can refer to the statue of Jowo Rinpoche in the Jokhang Monastery or other objects symbolizing the nature of Buddha like statues, *thangkas* and stupas. Therefore, it is the same center symbolizing of Buddha, although it occurs in varied forms in different places. As the term "spiritual magnetism" has the deficiency I stated earlier, I would like to use what I call "sacred gravitation" to interpret circumambulation, which generally is directly proportional to be the product of its sacredness and inversely

proportional to the feasibility of being there. The degree of sacredness is decided by the power or status of the sacred object. For example, as the most sacred statue with the most sacred power in Tibet, the Jowo Rinpoche can attract pilgrims from remote parts of Tibet or even outside of Tibet; however, it is not easy for people who are poor to go there and circumambulate it. Instead, those people circumambulate local sacred sites or monasteries to gain merit. The sacred gravitation of a particular sacred object may vary for temporal, political, or other reasons. For instance, Mount Kailash attracts more pilgrims during the auspicious Year of the Horse.

The circumferences of different lengths in this model indicate circular movement, which is the way Tibetans venerate sacred objects and gain merit. The sacred gravitation which a person receives is equal to the power or merit which can be received; being closer to a sacred object allows more power and merit to be obtained. The different types of circumambulation around sacred landscapes, cities and monasteries ritually express this principle and the distance relationship (from outer to inner) between sacredness and people. For example, people in Lhasa also called the path of circumambulation around the Jowo Rinpoche *nang skor*, and hence what was previously referred to as *nang skor* around the main chapel of Jowo Rinpoche becomes *bar skor* and the previous *bar skor* around the Jokhang Monastery becomes *gling skor* (Zhang 2006: 42). Such closer circumambulation can obtain more merit from its shorter distance to the sacred object; the larger circumambulation can obtain more merit by virtue of its length and duration around the object.

Circumambulation ritually embodies the Tibetan worldview of sacredness, time and space. This model indicates not only the pattern of circumambulation, but also the pattern of relationship between the Tibetan worldview and Tibetans. Tibetans consider time to be

endless and circular rather than linear. As for space, sacred space in Tibet is established by circumambulation, namely, the space formed by the circular movement around the sacred center, vice versa, to experience that sacredness, people must move around it.

Religious Involution and Pragmatism

When I was in Tibet in 2012, I saw Tibetans piously circumambulate sacred places and perform full body prostration. In the meantime, I also saw Tibetans use electronic prayer wheels, a method which seems somewhat like "cheating". Why and how can these attitudes coexist in Tibet?

William James divides religion into two categories: institutional religion and personal religion. On the one side, institutional religion maintains the divinity and its essentials, including worship, sacrifice, theology, ceremony, and ecclesiastical organizations; on the other side, personal religion maintains humanity and its essentials, including conscience, deserts, helplessness, and incompleteness (James 1902: 28-29). In the context of Tibetan society, on the one side are the complicated monastic system, deliberate rituals, and esoteric Tantric practices of Tibetan Buddhism. From the religious perspective, the aim of this institutional Tibetan Buddhism is to achieve enlightenment and Buddhahood. On the other side are the simple religious practices and isolated Tantric practices; the aim of this personal Tibetan Buddhism is the search for solutions to mundane affairs and to gain rebirth in the human realm painlessly. The gap between them is obvious and significant.

I think the reason for this gap is a religious involution based on the particular history and environment of Tibet. Being in an enclosed high-altitude area surrounded by mountains,

communication between Tibet and outside places in ancient times was difficult to make. Tibetan Buddhism therefore developed in a closed environment restricted to the Himalayan region and had no opportunity to spread widely, unlike Islam and Christianity. In addition, its political control of Tibet and the esoteric nature of Tantric Buddhism, which is the core of Tibetan Buddhism, prohibited its spreading widely. The inner structure of Tibetan Buddhism developed into an extremely delicate form. For common people who cannot be engaged in the Tantric practices, which are the fastest and most convenient, they must find other ways to maximize their merit. Since they cannot use the spiritual convenience of Tantric Buddhism, they choose physical convenience instead. In this way, the substitute religious practices—prayer wheels, wind-horse flags, circumambulation by automobile, and so forth are all practiced. When I circumambulated Mount Kailash, I even encountered some people who were too weak and unable to circumambulate themselves, and so hired others to do it for them. However, Pranavananda mentions that some rich people will also do this (Pranavananda 1950: 12). By such means, normal Tibetans maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of gaining merit by regular practices in their own way.

This substitute method of self-cultivation not only expresses the adaptation in Tibetan circular philosophy, but also indicates the pragmatism in Tibetan society. No matter whether institutional or personal Tibetan Buddhism, they both accept it—wrathful demons as protective deities and electronic prayer wheels are both good examples. It is embodied vividly in the development of Tibetan Buddhism since 1959 when it was forced to face the world, becoming a prevalent religion worldwide in a short time through processes of globalization, localization, and secularization.

Chapter VI. Conclusion

The impetus for my research came from my curiosity about why Tibetans rotate prayer wheels; however, I found this was not an easy question to answer. Therefore I wrote this thesis, in which I have tried to answer three questions: (1) what is circumambulation in Tibet? (2) what are the sacred objects at the center of people's circumambulation? and (3) why do Tibetans circumambulate sacred objects as religious practice?

In this thesis I reviewed both the English and Chinese literature about circumambulation in Tibet, some of them are firstly mentioned in English in this area of research. Since my field work in Tibet was short and I do not speak Tibetan, I cannot write a detailed ethnography. Instead, I chose three representative cases of circumambulation in Tibet—Mount Kailash, Lake Manasarovar and Lhasa—to do field work. And then in the thesis, I included an essential introduction to Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism, and autoethnographic writings of my personal circumambulation to help readers to experience and understand it in Tibet. To interpret circumambulation, I developed Preston's concept of "spiritual magnetism" and used my own term "sacred gravitation" to explain the circular rituals in Tibet, and therefore consider rotating prayer wheels as one of them.

To understand this, it is necessary to know the Tibetan society. Religion is a core element of Tibetan society and culture. Tibetan history features the dominance of religion through time; from early Bon traditions to the ecclesiocracy of the Gelukpa, religion and politics have interacted intensively and extensively. The relationship between them is ambiguous and inseparable. This relationship led to the "demise of the lamaist state" (Goldstein 1989), but also has brought worldwide attention to Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism since the 1960s. To

some extent, the history of Tibet is a history of religion. There are two main religions closely engaged with Tibet. One is Bon, the indigenous religion, and the other is Buddhism, the exotic religion from India. These two religions struggled with each other over the ages, and influenced each other. Consequently, this process resulted in Buddhism absorbing Bon magic and Bon absorbing Buddhist dharma. This Buddhism with Bon characteristics, with the addition of Tantric tradition, is the Tibetan Buddhism that distinctively differs from other Buddhist traditions.

With the dominance of Tibetan Buddhism, the indigenous Tibetan concept of sacredness, *gnas*, has become connected with it or transformed into Buddhist sacredness, and therefore it generated many sacred objects related to Buddhism including mountains, lakes, cities, monasteries, statues, images, prayer wheels and so on. In addition, some lamas can also be regarded as sacred as Tibetan tradition. These sacred places and sacred objects are the centers of religious life in particular areas, some of them are even the centers of the whole Tibetan cultural areas. In order to venerate them, to show respect, and to gain merit, Tibetans mainly perform rituals of circular movement including circumambulation and rotating prayer wheels. Pilgrimage in the Tibetan context is thus considered here as large-scale circumambulation.

This circular movement is the ritual expression of the circular philosophy of Tibet Buddhism that includes the concepts of worldview, time, and space. To some extent, it also reflects the nature worship of circle-shape objects, for example, the sunwise direction of circumambulation. In the religious life of personal Tibetan Buddhism, circumambulation is the symbolic medium between sacredness and secular life, and the method people use to mediate the relationship between sacredness and themselves. This relationship forms a religious field in Tibetan society, and the force of this field is what I have termed sacred

gravitation. In this field, sacred gravitation can define and explain the forms of circumambulation in Tibet.

Circumambulation is a universal ritual in different cultures around the world. Although varied cultures practice it in varied ways, it is essentially circular movement around a sacred center. Therefore, the concept of sacred gravitation may also apply to circumambulation in other cultures or other circular rituals. For example, circumambulation in Hinduism is known as *pradakshina* 'circumambulation of an object clockwise' (Nakamura 1951: 346). This term also refers to the circumambulatory path. As the origin place of both Hinduism and Buddhism, circumambulation in Tibet may come from India and thus share many attributes—for instance, diverse objects of worship including deities, temples, mountains, lakes, and so forth. Unlike in Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism pays a significant attention to water; as I mentioned earlier, the Hindu term for pilgrimage, *tirthayatra*, literally means 'a journey to a place of water', and so circumambulation around whole rivers is known. The Narmada River is one of the most sacred rivers in India; circumambulation around it goes from its source to its mouth and back again, a journey of 2,600 km on foot (India International Centre 2010: 25). This is not what happens in Tibet, but it carries the same symbolic meaning, and perhaps even more clearly, with the endless process going from beginning to end. Although the forms of circumambulation in Tibet and India vary, they share some similar characteristics. In my opinion, circumambulation is the means by which people deal with the sacred center or objects in a bodily way, and circular movement is the choice of many cultures. However, it still needs more researchers to testify and revise this concept in the future.

Comparing with other areas in Tibetology, study of circumambulation lacks enough attention. And perhaps the textual study of Tibetan classics is not a best way to study a ritual in modern

society. The anthropological methods, such like interview and participant observation, are more suitable to this kind of topic which involves physical movement and interaction. In the anthropological field works, you can see how a ritual is performed in real life and its differences and changes from what you read in books. During my field work in Tibet in 2012, I found that the ways Tibetans do circumambulation has expanded as the development of technology, they use modern vehicles instead of walking, and they also use electricity and computer to rotate prayer wheels instead of human power and natural power. Therefore I argued that common Tibetan believers have a pragmatic bent and strong adaption to the modern technology to perform religious practices.

In addition, the anthropological way of thinking can provide new perspectives and inspirations to study traditional topics of Tibetology differently. For example, Tim Ingold's specific focus of walking itself made me rethink circumambulation out of its religious background, and interpret it under the perspective of bodily movement in high-altitude Tibet. Thus circumambulation becomes not only a ritual to symbolize samara, but also a bodily adaption to mountainous environment.

Although this thesis answered my questions, there are still some blanks to address in future research. First, it lacks detailed personal case studies of pilgrimage and circumambulation in Tibet including both Tibetan Buddhism and Bon. It is a good way to participate in an individual pilgrim or pilgrimage group to observe the whole process of pilgrimage: why they want to pilgrimage? How they prepare it? What are changes of body and mind during pilgrimage? How are the profane aspects during pilgrimage? This research can provide a micro perspective of personal experience of pilgrimage and circumambulation.

Second, how do Tibetan classics, oral traditions and lamas explain circumambulation? The systematic textual studies and interview can provide not only a clear history of circumambulation as a ritual in Tibet to help understand its developments and changes through history, but also a theoretical interpretation of circumambulation from religious view. This is a difficult work, but it has a significant academic value for future research in this topic, it can answer some basic questions such like the origin of circumambulation in Tibet.

Third, how does circumambulation change in the future? This is an interesting question because that the development of Tibet is much faster than before, you can see how it has changed in a short period after the 1980s. Will they still be doing circumambulation after 50 years? In the article *Visual Pilgrimage on the Internet*, MacWilliams gives an example of a website named Beliefnet.com provides online prayer circles and virtual Hajj to give Muslims a virtual pilgrimage or cyberpilgrimage (MacWilliams 2002: 316-317). Because of the strong adaption to modern technology and pragmatic bent of Tibetans I mentioned previously, I guess Tibetans may have virtual pilgrimage to sacred sites and do the virtual circumambulation on the Internet or use other alternatives to do circumambulation in the future.

Circumambulation is a prolific phenomenon in many cultures. However, it relatively does not get enough notice in anthropology. Tibet is also not a usual place for anthropological fieldwork for historical and political reasons. We can use anthropological way to rethink traditional topics in Tibetology; similarly, new Tibetan case studies can testify and revise anthropological theories. By writing this thesis, I hope it could bring more attention to circumambulation and to Tibet in anthropology.

Appendix. Tibetan Word List

Tibetan Spelling	Phonetic Form	English
agro	*adro*	going
agro ba	*adro ba*	goer
agro bai bla ma	*adro bai la ma*	buddha; high one of the goers
agro bai mgon po	*adro bai gön po*	Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva; lord of the goers
agro ba rigs drug	*adro ba rik druk*	six classes of goers
agro ba rin chen	*adro ba rin chen*	great-value goers; human
agro mchog	*adro chok*	perfect goers; human
ba	*ba*	people
bar skor	*bar kor*	the intermediate circumambulatory path
bardo	*bardo*	intermediate state
bdud	*dü*	demon
bla	*la*	the vitality; life-power
bod	*bö*	Tibet
bodpa	*bö pa*	Tibetan people
bon	*bön*	Bon; chant repeatedly
bsang	*sang*	purification
bskor	*kor*	spin
bskor ra	*kor ra*	to go in a circuit; circumambulation
bstan gyur	*ten gyur*	Indian treatises
byin	*jin*	empowerment
dag-snang	*dak nang*	pure visions
darchen	*darchen*	flag pole
dmu thag	*mu tak*	ladder of sky
dorje	*dojé*	thunderbolt
dreg pa	*drek pa*	demon
dregs pa pho mo	*drek pa po mo*	demoness
droma la	*droma la*	the pass of Tara
dud agro	*dü adro*	stooping goer; animal
gangs rinpoche	*gang rinpoché*	precious treasure of mountain; Mount Kailash
gangs ti se	*gang ti sé*	brisk mountain; Mount Kailash
geshe	*geshé*	the highest academic degree in Tibetan Buddhism and Bon
glang chen gtsang po	*lang chen tsang po*	Elephant Fountain River
gling skor	*ling kor*	continent path
gnam thag	*nam tak*	ladder of sky
gnas	*né*	sacred objects; sacredness

gnas mchog	*né chok*	sacred places
gnas mjal	*né jel*	to encounter or meet a *gnas;* pilgrimage
gnas ri	*né ri*	mountain where holy people lived
gnas skor	*né kor*	going around a *gnas*; pilgrimage
gnas skor ba	*né kor ba*	people who go around a sacred place; pilgrim
gnyan	*nyen*	mammal
gu byi mang ske	*gu ji mang ké*	a Tibetan god
gzhi bdag	*zhi dak*	owner of base
khor ba	*kor wa*	wheel of birth and rebirth; circumambualtion
khram shing	*tram shing*	the plate used for catching ghosts
klu	*lu*	water spirit
kyang	*kyang*	Tibetan wild ass
kyichu	*kyichu*	Lhasa River
lagngar co	*la ang co*	lake of demons; Lake Rakshastal
langs agro	*lang adro*	erect goer; human
lha	*la*	god
lhasa	*la sa*	place of the gods; Lhasa
lto agro	*to adro*	belly goer; snake
lung btsan	*lung tsen*	prophecies
ma ja gtsang po	*ma ja tsang po*	Peacock River
mani	*mani*	jewel
Mani khor loi phan yon	*mani kor lo pen yön*	*The Benefits of the Mani Wheel*
mani chos khor	*mani chö kor*	precious dharma wheel; prayer wheel
Mani Kabum	*mani kabum*	*Sutra of Mani Kabum*
mani lha khang	*mani la kang*	shrine of prayer wheel
mapam yumco	*mapam yumco*	undefeatable jade lake; Lake Manasarrovar
mchong agro	*chong adro*	jumping goer; frog
mkhaa agro ma	*kha adro ma*	sky-going females; dakini
nang skor	*nang kor*	the inner circumambulatory path
nyal agro	*nyel adro*	lying-down goer; worm
om mani padme hum	*om ma ni padmé hum*	adoration to the Jewel in the Lotus, amen
pa	*pa*	people
Palden Lhamo	*paden lamo*	a Tibetan goddess
phra men dakinis	*tra men dakinis*	hybrid dakini, demoness
phur agro	*pur adro*	flying goer; bird
phyi skor	*chi kor*	the outer

		circumambulatory path
Rin byung	*rin jung*	a Tibetan iconographic compendium
rkyal agro	*kyel adro*	swimming goer; fish
rta mchog gtsang po	*ta chok tsang po*	Horse Fountain River
rtse skor	*tsé kor*	top circumambulatory path
sab bzhed	*sap zhé*	*The Annotated sba Account*
saga dawa	*saga dawa*	Buddha's birthday
seng ge gtsang po	*seng gé tsang po*	Lion Fountain River
sgrib	*drip*	shadow; stain
sgrib gnyis	*drip nyi*	embodied psycho-physical defilement
skor ra	*kor ra*	to go in a circuit; circumambulation
smud skor	*mü kor*	low circumambulatory path
srin mo	*sin mo*	demoness
stod bod	*tö bö*	upper Tibet
stod skor	*tö kor*	up circumambulatory path
thangka	*tangka*	scroll of painting
Tise lo rgyus	*tisé lo gyü*	*Pilgrimage guide to Mount Kailash*
tsampa	*tsampa*	main food of Tibetans
tulku	*tuku*	reincarnation
vdu gnas	*vadu né*	gathering places
yidam	*yidam*	deity of meditation
yul lha	*yül la*	territorial god

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