
Sentience of the Earth: Eco-Buddhist Mandalizing of Dwelling Place in Amdo, Tibet

Dan Smyer Yü

Center for Trans-Himalaya Studies, Yunnan Minzu University,
Kunming, Yunnan Province, China
anthrotopia@hotmail.com

Abstract

I present a case study of Tibetan Buddhism as a lived religion embodied in the greater environment of a village in eastern Amdo, Tibet. Specifically, I explore the interconnectedness of place-based Buddhist practices that, I argue, present an example of care for sacred landscapes in Tibetan Buddhism. Based on my ethnographic work, I make a threefold argument. First, Buddhism in Tibet can be viewed as ‘an emplaced religion’ signifying the antecedent role of place in forging the complex intertwinement of the Earth and humans. Second, the sacredness in the local landscape entails a shared, hierarchical entwinement of place, humans, and gods. Third, the way the villagers, especially the lay tantric yogis, consecrate their environment expresses their connection and care for the landscape.

Keywords

Tibet, Lived Buddhism, emplacement, mandalization, ancestral memory.

On a sunny afternoon in October 2010 in a village in eastern Amdo, a region located in Qinghai Province, China, I sat outside the meditation cabin of Babu (Grandpa) Tashi, a revered yogi and medicine man in his late seventies. He related the following story:

Sadeg Doche (ས་བདག་སྟོ་ཚེ) is a god who lives inside the Earth. The literal meaning of his name is ‘big-bellied master of the Earth’. *Sadeg Doche* does not reside in a particular part of the Earth but wanders from one end of it to the other. The Earth is his body. It has blood, flesh, and bones just like

the components of a human body. No one would fail to protect his body... So when we fell forests on the surface of the Earth or dig deep into the mountains we anger him. Every one of us is made out of earth, water, fire, and wind—the four elements. When we anger him, he mobilizes these elements as our enemies. This is seen when a fire swallows up an entire forest or a sudden earthquake turns what is on the earth's surface into a pile of ashes or a vast body of water. It is because *Sadeg Doche* shakes up the Earth when he is angry... Mountain gods act the same way as *Sadeg Doche*. The mountains are their bodies. When we please them they are happy and therefore, they protect us.

According to Babu Tashi's explanation, the Earth is not only self-sustaining, but sentient: it possesses reflexes of self-protection, responds to pleasure and pain, and desires an equitable, reciprocal relationship with other forms of life. The power relation between the Earth and humans is unequal, however, for the power to determine life and death resides with the Earth rather than with humankind. The Earth allows *Homo sapiens* to thrive, but can also deprive us of our existence. This story thus recognizes a set of complex, dynamic human relations with the Earth in religious, spiritual, psychic, imaginative, and material terms.

Babu Tashi's story hints at the complex ways in which ecology and religiosity are entwined in Tibetan Buddhism. In what follows, I will explore and elaborate this connection more fully. My argument is threefold. First, Buddhism at Babu Tashi's village entails not merely a set of embodied human social acts but also, more critically, constitutes what I call 'an emplaced religion'. The 'emplacedness' here refers to the foundational role of place in forging the complex relationship between the Earth and humans, such that place appears to be both the outer environment and the inner symbolic sphere of the person and his or her community (Casey 1997: x). Second, the emplacement of Buddhism in both the greater physical landscape of Babu Tashi's village and the mindscape of local people compels me to reconsider the existing scholarly argument about the vertical nature of sacredness concerning Tibetan sacred mountains, which suggests that the higher the mountain, the more sacred it is. Herein, I propose instead a set of horizontally identifiable spiritual power relations, which can be understood as a shared hierarchy entwining place, humans, and gods. Third, I argue that the consecration of the dwelling place and its surrounding environment (including especially the mountainous landscape) promotes an ethos of care based on mutuality and 'inter-being'. In short, I explore the ecological logic of place-based Buddhist practices concerning a Tibetan native mode of living in communion and care for the environment.

Ethnographic and Interpretative Approaches

This article is based on a decade of ethnographic research. My initial research interest was in Han Chinese Buddhist pilgrims seeking tantric teachings from lamas and yogis in the area (Smyer Yü 2011). While participating in these cross-cultural and cross-ethnic religious exchanges, I noticed two modes of pilgrimage: while the pilgrimage of Chinese Buddhists was centered on their Tibetan teachers, local Tibetans were place oriented, invoking earth deities on a daily basis and undertaking seasonal circumambulations of sacred mountains and lakes. I soon began a new project studying the entwinement of landscape and mindscape, and lived experiences and perceptions (Smyer Yü 2014). This time I found that traditional note-taking in the field was quite limiting when documenting the spatial and affective aspects of how the villagers' Buddhist practices extended beyond human religious affairs into the greater physical environment animated with gods and spirits. In 2010 I visually documented the ritualized relationship between mountain gods, humans, and the Earth. Later I edited the footage into an ethnographic film entitled *Embrace* (Smyer Yü and Pema Tashi 2011).¹ The narratives of Babu Tashi and his son are the thematic threads of the film. What I learned from this visual anthropology project is that in Babu Tashi's vision, the mountains surrounding his village are simultaneously mountains and gods and goddesses of the Earth. In this formulation, it is both gods and humans who together animate the Earth. This common sentience establishes an empathetic bond between humans and deities, one that is mediated through the Earth. Much of the ethnographic data in this article comes from my visual documentation of Babu Tashi and others' narratives in Tibetan.

In order best to express the insights I gained while living in Amdo, I feel it is best to accept or at least hypothesize Babu Tashi's vision of the Earth as sentient. This permits an empathetic understanding of the animated relationship between the Earth, gods, and humans. Unlike the natural sciences, the social scientific study of religion often demands our experience and imagination to approach an understanding of other people's religious worldviews, perceptions, and felt sense of the sacred. To share better my empathetic experience with Babu Tashi's place-based Buddhist practices with an interdisciplinary readership, I employ theoretical perspectives from the study of lived religion and the anthropology of landscape, especially, Ammerman (2007a), Ingold (2000), and Casey (1997). From such perspectives, everyday religion (Ammerman

1. Editor's note: see the Documentary Review in this issue of the *JSRNC*.

2007b) or lived religion (Hall 1997) is understood as one's 'habitual and embodied actions' (Bender 2012: 274) and is entwined with what Edmond Husserl calls 'lifeworld' (*Lebenswelt*). The lifeworld is presented to individuals as from those in their cultural environment and it saturates their experiences and perceptions through a set of inter-subjective engagements (Husserl 1970: 109). As most phenomenologists and lived-religion scholars see it, the canonic (or doctrinally orthodox) dimension of a given religion differs from the lived or enacted version of the practitioner. I focus on the spiritual-ecological nexus of Buddhist practices at Babu Tashi's village in order to answer questions of how, as depth ecologist Arne Naess put it, 'a sense of place is strengthened through a tightening of the inter-relation between the self and the environment and how place "determines one's attitudes, one's likes and dislikes, and one's general outlook"' (2008: 45, 57).

Embodiment of Ancestral Memories in Gods and Spirits

One way in which the importance of place was evident in Tibet was in local beliefs about how certain physical features of the landscape were connected to deities and ancestors. Babu Tashi lives in a small farming village of approximately 80 families called Rachekyi, in Cheka, Amdo (currently Guide County, Qinghai Province), known for its communities of *ngapas* (སྒྲུག་པ་ལྔ།) and *ngamas* (སྒྲུག་པ་ལྔ།), or yogis and yoginis, of the Nyingmapa order. *Ngapas* and *ngamas* are lay practitioners; however, Babu Tashi and other elders in the area regard this 'lay' strand of Tibetan Buddhism as the original form of tantric Buddhism brought to Tibet from India by Padmasambhava in the eighth century. This folk claim accords with historical research showing that Padmasambhava was a visionary, a ritual master, a powerful miracle performer, an invincible tamer of demons, and the ultimate transformer of the Tibetan religious landscape (Guenther 1996). People in Rachekyi revere Padmasambhava as the original and ultimate *ngapa*.

'Lay' (or 'laity') is a slightly inaccurate word to describe the order of *ngapas* and *ngamas*. *Ngapas* and *ngamas* are religious specialists whose skills overlap with their monastic counterparts but are uniquely embodied in their routines of Buddhist practice and the responsibilities of family life. The lifeworld in the specially trained vision of an *ngapa* or *ngama* is a living world of beings with and without physical forms, including gods and spirits, all of whom take residence on, above, and beneath the Earth's surface, in the aquatic world, on land, and deep in the sky. Buddhism is not merely talked or read about and meditated upon but is an experienced part of the physical world.

As an *ngapa*, a ritual specialist, and a medicine man, Babu Tashi dwells in a place that from his tantric perspective is an embodiment of his ancestors, as well as gods and spirits. Known in his village as the *tsamkang* (མཚམས་ཁང་། meditation house), his meditation house is built upon a small hill and consists of a main house and two south-facing cabins. The main house is where he treats his patients and where he stores his herbal medicines. In one cabin he makes his medicines from herbs and minerals, while in the other, built on the hillside directly above, he undertakes solitary retreat whenever he has the opportunity. It was here that I first began to see how Buddhism is both a personal spiritual path and the primary medium linking together built and natural environments, the spirit-world, and human consciousness.

To view Buddhism at Rachekyi as a lived religion is to examine how it is practiced, experienced, and context-oriented (Orsi 2002: xxxix; Hall 1997: vii). From this perspective the religion is ‘not mere “mentality” or frame of mind’ but entails ‘embodied practices’ (McGuire 2008: 12-13). Moreover, it is interwoven with the religious practitioner’s kinship network, community, and greater living environment (Ammerman 2007a: 5). In this sense, a religion lived on an everyday basis by non-elite practitioners is not neatly woven together with the tradition’s canon, doctrines, or ecclesiastic prescriptions. It is embodied in the body and mind of the practitioner as well as transferred onto, symbolized, or personified in the practitioner’s living environment. This embodiment involves a continuing cultural process in which the nexus of the body-mind and place is interlaced with lifelines of all sorts (Casey 1993: 31). The sustenance of the body, for example, is drawn from the natural environment, and consecration and conservation of the environment are initiated as human acts. In this sense, an embodied religion is not merely materialized in the social acts of the individual but is also lived out in specific living environments. Thus, religion is a living process of place-making and order-making involving a deep entanglement of the sentience of the practitioner with his or her social and ecological sphere. What is external is internalized while what is internal is externalized. In this process the sacred and the worldly, along with the somatic and the psychic, saturate each other with both psychological and ecological effects.

The terrace outside Babu Tashi’s solitary retreat cabin is a vista point where one can see the entire village and the mountains surrounding it. According to him, his grandfather chose this small hill in the middle of the current village as the site of his own meditation house because of the view that shows the four deity mountains embracing the village. The mountain gods are revered by villagers as Dharma protectors, warrior gods, wealth gods, and weather makers. Since locals believe that the

mountain gods were their ancestors, some of whom were related to their ancient kings, they are seen as supernatural persons who are in an ancestral line mixed with the region's humans. Babu Tashi's daily Buddhist recitations and prayers are directed to the mountain gods who embody the local Tibetans' memories of their ancient past.

The four mountains surrounding the village are Amne Kodtse (ཨ་མུལ་ཚོང་མེ) in the north, Ama Tsochel (ཨ་མ་མཚོ་འབྲིལ།) in the east, Amne Dobdan (ཨ་མུལ་བོད་དན།) in the south, and Amne Domri (ཨ་མུལ་ལྷོ་རི།) in the west. These are the names of both the mountains and the four mountain deities. This non-differentiation between the deities and the landscape perceptively indicates to the local people that the Earth is animated and inspired with these deities (Smyer Yü 2011: 62). The nomenclatural and perceptual interchangeability between the names of mountains and mountain deities also serves to preserve the cultural origin of the village and its residents. In other words, the perceptual conflation of a mountain with the deity residing 'in' it preserves the village's memory of their ancestors. Each of the four mountains and mountain deities is a reminder of the past.

Amne Kodtse, the dominant deity and the highest mountain among the four, is described as a *dgra-lha* (དག་ལྷ།) or a warrior god. He wears a thick felt hat and shows his commanding presence on horseback, bearing a shield in his right hand and a vase filled with treasures in his left. According to local folklore he is a son of Amne Machen (ཨ་མུལ་མཚན།), one of the nine original mountain deities of Tibet. This 'kinship tie' immediately connects Rachekyi to the rest of Amdo and greater Tibet, because Amne Machen is a son of Ode Gungyel (འདེ་གུང་རྒྱལ།), the patriarch of these original mountain deities.² Amne Kodtse, in the greater area of Rachekyi, is a grandson of Ode Gungyel. This 'bloodline' is not only the ancestral line of the mountain deities but is also a human 'bloodline' embodied in the mountain deities. Mt. Ode Gungyel is located in southern Üzang, current Sangri County of Tibetan Autonomous Region. The name 'Ode Gungyel' is a pseudonym of Mutri Tsemp (མུའི་བཙུན་པོ།), the second king of ancient Tibet, who according to the historical record lived from 345 BCE to 272 BCE. In both mythological and historical terms, many important mountain deities in Tibet are both gods and humans, with human ancestors incarnated as gods and gods being the immortal form of humans.

2. The Nine Mountain Deities of Tibet (མིང་པ་ཚགས་པའི་ལྷ་དགུ་ srid pa chags pa'i lha dge) are Ode Gungyel (འདེ་གུང་རྒྱལ།), Nyenchen Tanglha (གཉན་ཚེན་ཐང་ལྷ།), Yarlha Shompo (ཡར་ལྷ་ཤོམ་པོ།), Machen Pomra (མཚན་པོམ་ར། Amne Machen), Nodchan Gangzang (གནོད་བྱིན་གང་བཟང།), Sygogchen Ldongra (སྟོགས་ཚེན་ལྷོང་ར།), Zhoglha Shugpo (ཚོགས་ལྷ་ལྷག་པོ།), and Jowo Yugyel (རྩོ་བོ་ལུག་ལྷ།).

According to Babu Tashi, Tibetans came to the area approximately six hundred years ago. This oral history accords with Gray Tuttle's (2011) finding that the formation of Amdo as a Tibetan cultural region began in the thirteenth century during which time Tibetans encountered other ethnic groups such as Mongols and Hors. This relatively recent presence of human settlement in the area presents a temporal predicament when I attempt to connect the stories of the almost timeless ancient gods from Central Tibet with this historical account. The stories explain, however, the origin of Amne Dobdan, the mountain (and deity) who stands behind the village's monastery. Originally not a Tibetan deity, Amne Dobdan was the protective deity of Shanba Miridzi (ཤན་པ་དམེ་བུ་མེ), the minister of the Hor (ཧོར) Kingdom. In local Tibetan mythology, the Hors were the enemy of the legendary Tibetan King Gesar and today they are recognized as an ethnic group known as 'the Tu' (in Chinese) who are descended from Mongols and Han. Minister Shanba Miridzi, according to local oral history, built a castle and meditation cabin at the current location of the village monastery on the foothill of Amne Dobdan.

Local history also states that the Tibetans and the Hors battled each other at the current location of the village. The Tibetans pushed out the Hors and the ruins of the castle are now a part of the local landscape where, during the summer, children play on the remnants of the thick, weathered walls. With the Hors long gone, their protective deity Amne Dobdan has been welcomed into the family of Tibetan gods and spirits; however, the memory of the war between Tibetans and the Hors resides in the red soil, which, according to Babu Tashi, is bright red because of the blood spilled in the battle. Other marks on the local landscape also carry the memory of the war, including the seasonal river flowing through the front of the village and the narrow ravine on the north side of the village. The former is called *Chagchilkhig* (ཐག་འཁྱིལ་ཐུག) or 'The Blood Circle', and the latter is named *Hor-gyon* (ཧོར་རྫོང་), a hideout place of the Hor soldiers. Because the fierceness of the Hor warriors remains in the memory of local Tibetans, Amne Dobdan is revered as a powerful warrior god. In this context, human memory is embodied in the landscape and vice versa.

Among the four local mountain deities, Ama Tsochel's genealogy is the least clear. In local folklore, Ama Tsochel, the only mountain goddess in the area, is Amne Kodtse's lover; however, Babu Tashi prefers to consider that she is a single wealthy and beautiful goddess. Ama Tsochel is much revered among the villagers as a wealth goddess and a peacemaker. In Babu Tashi's description, she wears an exquisite bonnet under which her lush black hair is worn coiled in a bun shaped like a dark green conch shell. She rides a doe, but unlike her male counterparts,

instead of weapons she holds a gorgeous treasure vase. This description matches a *tangkha* painting found in the local monastery. The folk memory attached to her relates to the recent history of local environmental changes since 1958, when the Chinese state began its socialist reform and modernization programs such as the Great Leap Forward and the Four Modernizations. It was during these massive state-led industrial activities that the majority of the local forests were cut down. Ama Tsochel's mountain body retains these recent scars from the Chinese state's modernization programs.

Ama Tsochel's name coincides with the ecosphere of her mountain. *Tso* (མཚོ།) means 'lake' and *chel* (འཇིགས།) means 'coming together'. There was a lake on the top of Ama Tsochel, the vestiges of which are still found on the mountain. In Babu Tashi's recollection, when he was young, Ama Tsochel was almost completely covered by a thick forest. From the terrace of his meditation cabin he pointed to the ridgeline telling me it was once called *Shanyal Sigdong* (ག་ཉལ་སའི་གདོང་།), meaning 'the ridge where deer sleep'. He recalled:

When I was young, I saw herds of deer as numerous as our sheep. I often saw fresh deer droppings but now we don't even see a hair of the deer let alone their droppings. When I was picking medicinal herbs there, I often saw two or three hundred mountain goats. Since 1958 they have been hunted to extinction here. Also, when our temple had empowerment ceremonies [before 1958], many animals showed up near the temple, including bears. Parents would tell children, 'Don't go over there. Bears will carry you into the woods.'

With very few exceptions, such populations of wildlife and their forested habit have now disappeared from the mountain. Babu Tashi's recollection indicates that Tibetans in the pre-socialist era had a different relationship with their land base, but the advent of Chinese modernization programs since the late 1950s has changed the local ecosystem by destructively extracting natural resources. In spite of this, however, the bond of the locals with their mountains and mountain deities continues to be expressed in their daily invocation of the gods and seasonal religious festivals requesting blessings and protection from them. Babu Tashi's daily offerings to the mountain deities are incense, highland barley liquor, and prayers selected from his Nyingmapa daily recitation handbook. Seeing him whisper when he was making offerings, I asked him what he had whispered. He replied,

I usually mutter something to the gods, like 'you're kind, heroic, and friendly'. By doing this the mountain gods take us in as friends with a kindred feeling like good friends. You call their names and give them offerings; so you say, 'I'm beseeching you today to help me'.

Through these ritualized, affective exchanges humans, deities, and deity mountains strengthen their bonds.

Sentience (སེམས་ཅན། semjan) of the Mountain Deities

In current scholarly works on Tibetan mountain culture, the word *gnas ri* (གནས་རི།) frequently appears and is commonly translated as ‘sacred mountain’. The sacredness associated with *gnas ri* is often related to their height and verticality as shown in the images of Amne Machen, Gang Rinpoche (གངས་རིན་པོ་ཆེ། Mt. Kalaish), and Mt. Kawa Karpo (ཁ་བ་དཀར་པོ།). Works by Gutschow (2003), Mckay (1998), and Panikkar (1996) express this perception of the sacredness embodied in *gnas ri* as signifying spiritual transcendence directly proportional to physical verticality. Scholars consider pilgrimage to these vertically awe-inspiring mountains to be an ‘ultimate pilgrimage’ (Panikkar 1996: 51).

For their part, locals consider these massive sacred mountains with their imposing heights to be ‘supernatural Buddhists and Bodhisattvas’. After the Buddhist transformation of Tibet, mountain gods such as Yarla Shompo and Amne Machen were regarded among Tibetans as *maha-bodhisattvas* who are among the most revered, enlightened bodhisattvas, and include Mañjuśrī, Samantabhadra, and Avalokiteśvara. Yet *gnas ri* plays more of a communal role than simply that of the vertically perceived sacred. As a generic term, *gnas ri* refers to the sacred qualities of a religious site, the places, such as lakes and mountains, where gods and spirits reside, and locations to which human communities ascribe ‘birthmarks’ where they entrust their collective memories and even souls. In this regard, *gnas ri* can be places rich with the spiritual power of saints who undertook solitary practice there. They could be the dwelling places of earth-based gods and spirits as well as the landmarks identified by humans. In many ways *gnas ri* appear more community oriented than vertically transcendent because they are the shared places of humans and the spirit world, places where gods are humanized and where humans are believed to find gateways into the realms of gods.

Thus, locals perceive *gnas ri*, being the bodies of deities, as sentient. As these earth-based deities do not have fixed physical forms, they often find their dwellings in natural objects, such as mountains, rivers, lakes, and the sky. Although the mountain deities are accepted into the human community, the two parties are not always on equal footing. Each possesses comparative advantages over the other. Such relationship could fit what David Keller and Frank Golley call ‘the nested hierarchy’, an ecological condition under which ‘Smaller entities are nested inside larger ones’ (Keller and Golley 2000: 29). Seen from this ecological perspective,

the mountain deities are able to influence weather in ways that are favorable or destructive to crops, can cure or worsen sicknesses, and can increase or deplete the regenerative power of the land; consequently they can dramatically affect human well-being. Such power held by the gods determines many of the social, environmental, and spiritual behaviors of humans. Thus, humans reflexively fear and revere gods and goddesses as supernatural beings, and consider themselves to be the 'smaller entities' residing in the midst of the mountain deities as 'the larger entities'.

From the local Buddhist perspective, however, humans, animals, gods, and spirits are spiritually equal. That is, while they may be subject to different experiences and modes of consciousness in the cycle of birth and death, they all possess the same Buddha Nature or seed of spiritual enlightenment (King 1991: 4). Thus, on a practical level, humans assume the same Buddhist identity as the deities. Additionally, humans possess Buddhist ritual techniques to negotiate with the mountain gods for the purpose of sustaining a mutually beneficial relationship. When necessary, humans are also able to restrain the deities with the ritually invoked power of the Buddha. In this sense, the fixed positions of and boundaries between humans and deities are subject to change, making it useful to regard their power relations as a Buddhism-based power contract, a shared hierarchy in which humans and gods retain their worldly niches and yet are able to exercise their supernatural or ritual power, respectively. For instance, Babu Tashi performs two types of rituals when he communicates with the mountain deities for his personal or communal wishes. One is called *sangchod* (བསམ་མཚན།) and another is *chenjol* (འཇིག་བཙོལ།). The former is a eulogy recited along with offerings to the deities. The latter consists of expressions pleasing to the deities but also embedding 'guilt-inducing' statements and 'threats' by invoking the power of Buddha Dharma. Here is an excerpt from Babu Tashi's *chenjol*:

Oh, all the spirits, we ask you if karmic fruits and fate exist in this world.
If you are true spirits, please discern truths from falsity for us.
When we make mistakes, we see ourselves as ignorant ones.
When you make mistakes, we see you as primordially wise spirits

In the name of the Buddha and Dharma Protectors
We order you to fulfill our wishes
And to protect the *sangha* of the Buddha.
You will not disobey and betray your bodhisattva vows.

Chenjol is performed to remind the local deities, who are inherent members of the local Buddhist community, of their conversion and subsequent Bodhisattva vows. Because of their vows, the deities are bound with humans in the moral and spiritual framework of the Buddha

Dharma. This spiritual dynamic cancels out the supernatural power of the deities. In this religiously altered vision they simply appear as equals of their human counterparts. The shared power in this respect comes from the Buddhist assumption of the spiritual equality of all sentient beings. The purpose of *chenjol*, however, is purely utilitarian. It is a ritual technique designed to protect human interests that are threatened by the destructive forces under the deities' control, such as hail, snowstorms, and floods. Thus Buddhism mediates the interplay of natural and supernatural power as these are engaged between deities and humans.

In most instances, people attempt to please the deities for worldly gain. From an existential perspective, humans in villages like Babu Tashi's are physically nested in the embrace of the deity mountains. Their dependence upon the total environment of their lifeworld is obvious. For example, their vulnerability compels them to display humility and affection to the mountain deities whom they believe control the (sometimes dangerous) weather. In the case of Rachekyi, as a farming community, festivals designated to make offerings to the deities and local practices that sustain humans' kindred relationship with the deities are found in the daily and annual routines of people and are geared toward ensuring the success of crops and human well-being. A new calendar cycle begins, for example, with Dugbar Lubtse (ལྷོག་བར་ལབ་ཚོ།), an annual festival held by residents of Rachekyi with neighboring villages to please the mountain deities. *Dugbar* means returning or completing a cycle (of a year), while *lubitse* refers to the tip of the mountain where the mountain god resides. The abbot of the village monastery and elder *ngapas* usually lead people up to one of the four deity mountains with offerings of blessed food and wine. Making offerings to the mountain deities highlights how humans please the mountain god on the New Year.

In these festivals, the mountain deities are presented as having multiple identities as Buddhists, warrior gods, and weather makers. Although their mountains are all generically known as *gnas ri*, they also bear different nomenclatures from circumstance to circumstance. Their sentient function can be extended from their warriorship and their control of natural forces to the status of *bla-ri* (བླ་རི།), loosely translated as soul-mountain. *Bla-ri* refers to a mountain to which the 'souls' of people and other sentient beings are entrusted. Oftentimes, the soul entrusted is not the soul of the deceased but of the living. Living beings, according to Tibetan life-science, have two kinds of 'soul', namely *nam-zhes* (རྣམ་ཤེས།) and *bla* (བླ།). *Nam-zhes* is often translated as 'mind' or 'consciousness attached to one's body', while *bla* is described as a mobile consciousness or soul outside one's body. In local belief, the life and death of *bla*

determine the life and death of the person. In this respect, when a spirit mountain is regarded as a *bla-ri*, its significance goes deeper than its power over people's daily lives. It spiritually and psychically connects itself directly with individuals in its human community. It both protects and is protected by that connection so that when one's *bla-ri* is not protected from an enemy's attack, its destruction also leads to the destruction of the person whose soul is entrusted to the mountain (Sonam Dorje 2002: 40).

In this sense, humans 'ensoul' their deity mountains and the mountains are embodiments of both the deities and that inner vital essence of the local people. To the villagers, Amne Kotsse is the local soul mountain and is often affectionately addressed as *gyi-lha* (ལྷ་སྐལ་), which literally means 'birth god'. This 'birth god' is synonymous with *gyi-sa* (ལྷ་སྐལ་གྱི་སྐལ་) or birthplace as the 'birth god' is embodied in a mountain. The soul-mountain then becomes the 'birthmark' representative of the connection between birthplace and people. From the perspective of Rachekyi residents, the person marks the mountain while the mountain remembers the person; thus the sentience of each connects itself with that of the other. This is how human souls are embodied in the Earth and in the deities of the Earth and how the deities also take residence in human consciousness. Both are horizontally bonded in an inter-sentient or inter-subjective fashion. The power of one shelters the other and vice versa, so that the inner essence of each being's life is protected by the other. Put in other words, the vitality of this shared dwelling place manifests itself in a set of interdependent modes of being among humans and mountain deities.

Mandalizing the Sentient Sacredness of Place, Gods, and Humans

When I first arrived at Rachekyi a decade ago, the abbot of the village monastery told me that the village landscape is visualized as a lotus flower with the village as the ovary and the four deity mountains as the petals. This symbolic resemblance of the landscape to a lotus flower enhances the village's spiritual association with Buddhism. The village is visually transformed into a Buddhist sacred site, and the monastery is then regarded as the center of the human community. Using Allan Grapard's phrase, the village is 'mandalized' (1982). In his study of Japanese sacred mountains, Grapard pointed out two significances of Buddhist mandalas. One pertains to the 'representation of the residence of the Buddha...[as] a metaphysical space which provided an insight into what Buddhism called the Realm of Essence' (Grapard 1982: 209). Another spiritually significant representation is the mandala as 'the

original nature of our heart-mind, free of illusions and passions' (Grapard 1982: 209).

Buddhist mandalization of human dwelling places or the natural environment is commonplace in Tibet, yet it differs from what Grapard found in Japan. In the Japanese case, mandalization appeared—in terms of its representations of Buddhist spirituality and cosmology, at least—as almost purely an event of transforming a worldly place into a sacred space (Grapard 1982: 204). The Tibetan case, by contrast, involves not merely the perceived Buddhist sacredness but, more critically, it pertains to a range of inter-sentient communications between mutual embodiments of Buddha Dharma, place, gods, and people (Smyer Yü 2011: 52). On a practical level, that is, while many human and natural places in Tibet are mandalized or consecrated in the framework of Buddhism, residents nevertheless guard associated worldly interests (e.g., health, wealth, and the survival of various species within their landscape) very seriously. It is commonly recognized by many Tibet scholars that Tibetans' eco-religious worldview shows that 'the phenomenal world is held to be inhabited by a host of spirit powers and deities who are organized into a single ritual cosmos and must be ritually acknowledged in relation to most areas of human activity' (Huber and Pedersen 1997: 584).

When such connectivity manifests in dwelling places or sacred sites, the lived reality experienced by the people is relationally woven together not as a self-contained process but, rather, as a greater sphere of being in which human dwelling is 'rooted in the engagement between persons and environment' (Ingold 2000: 5). From the perspective of anthropology of landscape, I find that the sacredness of a mandalized dwelling place, such as that of Rachekyi, is inherently connected with the body, mind, and culture of the human dweller as well as with the greater world 'inhabited by beings of manifold kinds' (Ingold 2000: 5). In sum, the relationally mandalized dwelling place is best understood in the eco-psycho-cultural, bio-psycho-religious, or bio-psycho-cultural nexus (Ingold 2000: 4). What is especially relevant in the Tibetan case is 'psycho' read in its etymological sense (Gk. *psukhē*) as 'soul'. It corresponds with the meanings of the Tibetan words—*sem* (སེམས་ mind; subjectivity), *semjan* (སེམས་ཅན་ sentience; living beings), *nam-zhes* (consciousness), and *bla* (soul, psychic vitality)—all of which frequently surface when Babu Tashi and other Tibetans address human relationships in the context of place and gods. This perceived 'psyche' of humans, gods, or places is the inner force or the sentience of life.

Buddhist practitioners and Buddhologists, generally speaking, take for granted the sentience of humans and animals, but perhaps we must consider the subject imaginatively if we wish to understand the Tibetan

experience of the sentience of land- and place-based gods and spirits. Whether the Earth is sentient or has the capacity to communicate with organisms is debated. Whatever the case, Babu Tashi's belief about Sadeg Doche, the deity living inside the Earth, resembles mythological and even scientifically articulated cases in other parts of the world, such as the ancient Greek belief in Gaia, the Earth-Goddess, and Lewis Thomas' hypothesis of the earth as a living cell (Thomas 1974: 148). For Babu Tashi and many Tibetans like him, the entire earth is indeed a single organism or a system of complex interactions between organisms. This is not scientifically proven; however, it appears cross-culturally universal that the belief of the earth as a sentient organism or a deity is widely found in different parts of the world. From Babu Tashi's perspective of earthly sentience, the physical formation of a sacred site such as Ama Tsochel is not the result of human conceptualization but perhaps of the inverse: a place that inherently possesses a latent but an able-to-be-perceived sacredness in its geological and topographic formation. Eliade calls this 'hierophany' (Eliade 1959: 11), a phenomenon wherein the potentiality of place-based sacredness is realized in the human encounter.

Scholars of landscape studies within the disciplines of anthropology, geography, and philosophy have begun to affirm the subjectivity of a given place. As Barbara Bender has argued, 'Landscape and time can never be "out there": they are always subjective' (Bender 2002: 103). The subjectivity of landscape is pertinent to what Bender refers to as 'the materiality of social relationships' (Bender 2002: 104) and what Ingold calls the 'dwelling perspective' (Ingold 1993: 172) toward place. A place is not merely a container or a background of human activities. Instead, as phenomenologist Edward Casey says, 'place has its own being, on the basis of which it is a "cause" (*aita*) and not something merely inert or passive (*argos*, *adranēs*)—something caused by something else in turn' (Casey 1997: 90). This sense that places can be active agents arguably mirrors Tibetan folk beliefs.

As a 'cause', place prompts responses and actions from humans and other organisms. Returning to Rachekyi and its surrounding landscape, its mandalization does not stop at the visualization of it as a lotus flower—the most-used metaphor of Buddhist transcendence—but involves people's actual physical and spiritual engagement with the landscape or the deity mountains. When a deity mountain is revered as a sacred site, it is not merely because of its impressive height or shape but because it affords human spiritual acts and collective existential and cultural needs. For instance, many caves in the four deity mountains have served as solitary retreat sites for yogis and monks. Two of the caves are said to have hosted Padmasambhava. Other locally revered

cave dwellers have included the late Akhu Rendzen Jegmed, the late Losel Rinpoche, and Lungdok Rinpoche, the current abbot of the village monastery. To them, caves are not only natural chambers, holes, or crevices in the mountains but are the ‘wombs’ of past saints and future Dharma masters and accomplished yogis. Babu Tashi himself dwelled in a cave called Jollong (འཇོ་ལོང་) on Amne Dobdan for solitary retreat several times while in his thirties and forties. He recalled, ‘Meditating there gave me a naturally grown spiritual bliss’. In this affective statement, one understands that his spiritual delight, in large measure, comes from the cave in the mountain itself even while Buddhism gives meaning to the cave to a site of meditation.

By positing the causal agency or the subjectivity of landscape, I have presented Buddhist practice at Rachekyi as an example of Buddhism in contemporary Tibet as it is embodied in both the landscape of the surrounding environment and the mindscape of the practitioner. Lived religion in this regard could be understood as a type of place-based reflexive spirituality (Ammerman 2007b: 223) or a spiritual *habitus* that is built in one’s social routines and that personalizes the canonic sacred Other (Buddhist enlightenment) for a practitioner’s eco-religious vision of the living environment. Focusing on the lived aspect of Buddhism demonstrates how the practitioner and his or her community members apply, modify, and sometimes ignore Buddhist canonic teachings. In contrast, the canonic image of Buddhism is non-theistic and discourages Buddhists’ reverence toward earth-deities. Monks at a Geluk monastery near Babu Tashi’s village, for instance, discourage their lay constituency from expressing reverence toward local deities. They are soteriologically oriented with the unchanging precepts handed down from the time of Shakyamuni Buddha.

This is not the version of Buddhism Babu Tashi embodies. His Buddhism appears ‘worldly’ because of its seemingly theurgical engagement with worldly affairs, which seeks to please and negotiate with local deities, prevent sickness, provide good luck, and alter the weather for a higher crop yield. What stands out among these worldly engagements is the affective bond between people and the mountains and mountain deities. Home does not exist only in a house or a village but is both physically and spiritually monumentalized with the mountains. Thus, this Buddhism is also a religion deeply connected to place, a notion derived from Casey’s phenomenological perspective that humans are ‘[e]mplaced beings’ (Casey 1997: x), meaning that ‘place serves as the condition of all existing things... To be is to be in place’ (Casey 1993: 15-16).

In this case, 'emplacement' signifies first and foremost one's situatedness in a physical place—ranging from the home, village, town, watershed, region, and finally nation. Such a place of intimacy has both geological character and social being embodied in itself as part of its own being and in the human mindscape as collective memories. Conversely, when place finds presence in the consciousness of the person, it can move with the body wherever it goes, producing emotions and nostalgia (Smyer Yü 2013: 160). This enables the entwining of landscape and mindscape.

Conclusion: The Affordances of the Earth

In this mutual embodiment of landscape and mindscape, I see the local landscape as the critical inter-being that encloses, environs, and joins together the ancestral lines and the sentience of gods and humans. By 'inter-being' I mean that the landscape has an intangible force that makes a religiously intended order-making process the joint work of human mindscape and landscape. The materiality of such inter-being is best expressed as a series of what the ecological psychologist James Gibson called 'affordances', which he thinks are innate in an environment but become perceptible when an organism finds utility from it. As Gibson defined the concept, 'The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill... It implies the *complementarity* of the animals and the environment' (Gibson 1986: 127, italics added). Objects in the environment are not considered to be affordances until they enter this complementary relationship. The caves in the mountains near Rachekyi, for example, were naturally formed holes and chambers before the yogis took seasonal residence in them for their individual practices of tantric Buddhism. The caves' geological formations were valued by the yogis that chose them for their practices of solitary meditation. The caves thus offer an affordance for spiritual practice that residents point to when speaking of factors that help consecrate the landscape.

From this perspective, the landscape presents multiple affordances to the residents of Rachekyi. The natural caves in the deity mountains would not be considered sacred sites had the prominent yogis not undertaken solitary meditation in them. This is what I mean by the materiality of inter-being—a ground of multiple affordances that makes possible the complementary relationship between a place and the humans in that place. In this sense, Buddhist mandalization of the village landscape is not unidirectional but requires intersubjective communication between place, humans, and gods. I emphasize again that it is an

intersubjective relation at work rather than an object–subject relation from an anthropocentric viewpoint. Gibson says, ‘An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective–objective and helps to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychological, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer’ (Gibson 1986: 129). This emphasis in perspective is meant to highlight affordance as a form of interlocution between environment and organism in which each engages the other and each is an agent rather than an object to the other. In this sense, place as an inter-being binds everything in the same enclosure.

To emphasize the point by way of closing, the Buddhist mandalization of Rachekyi’s built environment and surrounding natural landscape is an enactment of the complementary relationship between place and people. It enables the people of the village to see their dwelling place as a Buddhist sacred site while also allowing people and the surrounding landscape to enter in communion with local gods and spirits. At Rachekyi, humans, gods, and place are therefore mutually enlivening and sustaining. To Babu Tashi and others in his village this indicates an inter-being that is an inherent part of the body of *Sadeg Doche*, the deified aspect of the earth. The enactments of mutual nurturing permit one to see a multitude of communions between the human lifeworld and the realm of gods, tied together by the physical landscape and animated by ancestral memories. It is a ‘rhizome world’ (Ingold 2000: 140) with complex roots entwining landscape and mindscape. In such entanglements the land nurtures the body, the gods nourish the psyche, the mind becomes an inner field of roots grown from both the land and the gods, and the religion imparts both existential and spiritual meanings. It is this sense of connectivity and mutuality that allows Babu Tashi and his *ngapa* peers to call the Earth *sagzhi-rinpoche* (ས་གཞི་རིན་པོ་ཆེ།) or the treasure of all treasures.

References

- Ammerman, Nancy T. 2007a. ‘Introduction: Observing Modern Religious Lives’, in N.T. Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (London: Oxford University Press): 3-20. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195305418.003.intro>.
- . 2007b. ‘Studying Everyday Religion: Challenges for the Future’, in N.T. Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (London: Oxford University Press): 219-38. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195305418.003.0013>.
- Bender, Barbara. 2002. ‘Time and Landscape’, *Current Anthropology* 43: S103-S112. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/339561>.

- Bender, Courtney. 2012. 'Practicing Religions', in Robert Orsi (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 273-95.
- Casey, Edward. 1993. *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).
- . 1997. *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Eliade, M. 1959. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper).
- Gibson, James J. 1986. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press).
- Grapard, Allan G. 1982. 'Flying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness: Toward a Definition of Sacred Space in Japanese', *History of Religions* 21.3: 195-21. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/462897>.
- Guenther, Herbert V. 1996. *The Teachings of Padmasambhava* (Leiden: Brill).
- Gutschow, Niels et al. (eds.). 2003. *Sacred Landscape of the Himalaya* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press).
- Hall, David (ed.). 1997. *Lived Religion in America: Toward A History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Huber, Toni, and Poul Pedersen. 1997. 'Meteorological Knowledge and Environmental Ideas in Traditional and Modern Societies: The Case of Tibet', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3.3: 577-97. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3034768>.
- Husserl, Edmond. 1970. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press).
- Ingold, Tim. 1993. 'The Temporality of the Landscape', *World Archaeology* 25.2: 152-74. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00438243.1993.9980235>.
- . 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge). Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203466025>.
- Keller, D., and F.B. Golley. 2000. 'Part I: Entities and Process in Ecology', in D. Keller and F.B. Golley (eds.), *The Philosophy of Ecology: From Science to Synthesis* (Athens: the University of Georgia Press): 21-33.
- King, Sallie B. 1991. *Buddha Nature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press).
- McGuire, Meredith. 2008. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press). Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195172621.001.0001>.
- McKay, Alex. 1998. 'Introduction', in A. McKay (ed.), *Pilgrimage in Tibet* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press): 1-17.
- Naess, Arne. 2008. 'An Example of a Place: Tvergastein', in A. Drengson and B. Devall (eds.), *Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess* (Berkeley: Counterpoint): 45-64.
- Orsi, Robert. 2002. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Panikkar, Raimon. 1996. 'A Pilgrimage to Kailasa and Manasasaras', in V. Elizondo and S. Freyne (eds.), *Pilgrimage* (London: SCB Press): 49-54.
- Smyer Yü, Dan. 2011. *The Spread of Tibetan Buddhism in China: Charisma, Money, Enlightenment* (London: Routledge).
- . 2013. 'Subaltern Placiality in Modern Tibet: Critical Discourses in the Works of Shogdong', *China Information* 27.2: 155-72. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0920203X13479860>.

- . 2014. *Mindscaping the Landscape of Tibet: Place, Memorability, Eco-aesthetics* (Boston: de Gruyter).
- Smyer Yü, Dan, and Pema Tashi (dirs.). 2011. *Embrace* (Hangzhou, China: Dongyang Mirage CineMedia Production). Online: yp@chinakaiyuan.com.
- Sonam Dorje. 2002. 'The Important Status of Soul Dwelling Sites in King Gesar Biography', *The Journal of Qinghai Nationality Research* 2: 39-42.
- Thomas, Lewis. 1974. *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* (New York: Viking Press).
- Tuttle, Gray. 2011. 'An Overview of Amdo (Northeastern Tibet) Historical Polities', *The Tibetan and Himalayan Library*. Online: [https://collab.itc.virginia.edu/wiki/aboutthl/An%20Overview%20Of%20Amdo%20\(northeastern%20Tibet\)%20Historical%20Polities.html](https://collab.itc.virginia.edu/wiki/aboutthl/An%20Overview%20Of%20Amdo%20(northeastern%20Tibet)%20Historical%20Polities.html).