

THE SECRET
LIFE OF
power
places

By Glenn H. Mullin



power places

I was speaking with a Tibetan friend living in Canada a few years ago, when the topic of life as a refugee in a foreign land came up. He, like most Tibetans living abroad, had left his homeland several decades earlier because of the Chinese Communist invasion of Tibet. I asked him what he missed most about the old country.

"*Khorwa*," he replied. "The walk-around. Over here there is nothing even slightly resembling it. For us, the morning and evening walk-arounds of our local sacred sites were highlights in our day. In addition, we would make occasional walk-arounds to more remote sacred places, and once a year undertake an even more distant one. And then there were the once in a lifetime walk-arounds, when we went to remote places like Mt. Kailash and Lhamo Lhatso, the Oracle Lake."

Anyone who has lived with the Tibetans in Asia can relate to his nostalgia. One is usually awakened at five in the morning by the sound of feet scurrying along the roads and paths, and the hum of prayers being quietly recited to the rhythm of turning mantra wheels. It is long before sunrise, but everyone is wide awake and off to their favorite local walk-around.

When I lived in Dharamsala, for example, the favorite was the two-mile path that began in the village, circled the *stupa* in the center of town, ran down to the left past the Dialectical School, circled the mountain on which the Dalai Lama's house stands, came back around the mountain to the Namgyal Dratsang Monastery, and returned to the village from there.

The path circling the mountain was especially significant to those who used it regularly, for every nook and cranny had its own story to tell. A small *stupa* at one place contained *tsa-tsas* with ashes of a deceased friend; at another stood a flat mantra stone that was once offered to celebrate a child's birth; and at another was a hut filled with small clay statues, reminding everyone of the year the Nechung Oracle had warned of a danger to the Dalai Lama's life and recommended that the Tibetan community collectively accumulate

tens of millions of *Mani* mantras as a means of eliminating the hindrance.

Some people walked alone while doing this *khorma*, using the time period for private thoughts and reflections, reciting their prayers and mantras as they went. Others walked in small groups: family or friends sharing a few spiritual moments together, chatting and perhaps even giggling and gossiping as they went. Young people walked, some meditatively and others simply hoping to capture a furtive glimpse of a potential lover. Falling in love is always wonderful, but falling in love at a sacred place is especially auspicious. And the very old hobbled around the path with their canes, hoping to generate a bit more merit and wisdom before the Lord of Death came calling.

This same ritual was repeated at the end of the day, although this time in a more leisurely fashion. The early morning *khorma* had been conducted with a pressed intensity, for everyone had to get back for the long day's work. The evening event was more of a celebration and an unwinding.

Every city and village in Tibet had its local walk-around. Larger cities such as Lhasa had a number of them: short neighborhood walk-arounds that became interconnected for longer *khorma* on especially auspicious days, such as Saka Dawa or Ganden Namchu ("The Butterlamp Festival," which commemorates Lama Tsongkhapa day on the 25th of the 10th Tibetan month).

However, whereas the *khorma* in Dharamsala tells the story of the Tibetans in exile from the early 1960s until the present time and only carries a significance that operates within this very limited dateline, the sites in Tibet are repositories of knowledge going back to ages before written history began. This knowledge is not mere information, such as a list of famous people who had meditated there or visited the place at some time or another, but is a force that operates simultaneously on a number of dimensions.



Yumbulhakang, reputedly the castle of the first Tibetan king, Nyatri Tsenpo, ornaments the Yarlung Valley

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Tantric Buddhist literature likes to address a given topic from three different perspectives, which it calls the outer, inner, and secret aspects. Every khorwa site similarly has three levels of discussion associated with it. The Second Dalai Lama mentions this in his autobiography, written in 1528. Like all Tibetans, he was a walk-around enthusiast, and made hundreds of them during his life.

One could say that the outer aspect of a particular power site is the manner in which history is told through it. The site stood there for ages, quietly watching as empires rose and fell, and as people great and small came and went. Eventually the power of the place was recognized, and either humans or gods built temples and monuments on it as adornments.

In 1498 the Second Dalai Lama made a *khorma* to Yarlung, Chonggye, and Olkha. He wrote several poems during his travels, but the one especially useful for our purposes is that written in Yarlung. Here he described this "outer significance" as follows,

The Yarlung Valley, ornament of the world,
Is a piece of the heavens fallen to earth.
The very symbol of our ancient ways,
Its arrow maiden carries tales of our glory
To Akanishta, heaven at the peak of the world.

In other words, the Second Dalai Lama is saying that the entire history of Tibet can be told through the sacred sites in Yarlung. It is "... the very symbol of our ancient ways." Here he is referring to the cave in which the monkey and abominable snowlady fell in love and mated millions of years ago, giving birth to the world's first humans (who happened to be Tibetans); the castle of the first Tibetan king, Nyatri Tsenpo, who unified the tribes of Central Asia in approximately 400 B.C. into a single nation; and also the birthplace and tomb of Songtsen Gampo, who made Buddhism the national religion of Tibet in approximately 650 A.D. The power places of



Yarlung were visited by great historical figures such as Padmasambhava, Atisha Dipamkara Shrijnana, Lama Dromtonpa, Lama Tsongkhapa, and the various Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama incarnations. A *khorma* to these sites puts the walker in touch with all of these time periods, events, and people. (The Second Dalai Lama uses the phrase "... its arrow maiden carries tales of our glory to Akanishta." In ancient Tibet letters were wrapped around an arrow, so that they could be transported without being crumpled. Often they would be delivered by a young maiden, a symbol of peace and good will.)

The Second Dalai Lama refers to the inner aspect of the power places of Yarlung as follows,

Beds of lotuses with transporting fragrances
Everywhere lie like patches of silk,
And beautiful maidens with eyes like antelopes
Stroll under trees laden with sweet-tasting fruit,
Their branches outstretched as though to signal
The wise to join in a festival of joy.

In other words, every power site has its own spiritual energy, and this energy invokes a particular state of consciousness. Those making pilgrimage there will arouse karmic seeds from many past lifetimes associated with that quality. Yarlung is especially linked to love and compassion. For this reason the Second Dalai Lama uses Tibetan poetic metaphors for compassion: "patches of silk," which is very soft and smooth; "eyes like antelopes," the animal that symbolizes non-aggression; and "sweet-tasting fruit," for compassion brings the sweet taste of happiness to both the practitioner and the recipient. The branches of the trees are "outstretched," for Buddhist compassion is unconditional and embraces all; and the branches "...signal the wise to join in a festival of joy," for those who do *khorma* here will spontaneously experience this sublime state of consciousness.

Thirdly, he refers to the secret aspect, which is the manner in which heaven and earth come together in synchronicity at the power places. Every power place has its own link to buddha form and mandala, its own qualities of paradise, and a particular divine force that flows through and can be accessed from it. The Second Dalai Lama writes,

The compassionate light of Lokeshvara,
the Buddha of Compassion,
Has illuminated the face of the earth for long.
His light has been especially strong here
(in Yarlung),
Blessing Tibet, this land circled by snow
mountains,
Scattering flowers of our fame far and wide.

With these words he links Yarlung to Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion, and the paradise known to Tibetans as Tru-dzin, or "Potala" in Sanskrit. The tribal chieftains of Yarlung became kings of Tibet in approximately 400 B.C., and within a thousand years their successors became emperors with authority over much of Central Asia. Their rule, according to the Second Dalai Lama's poem, was essentially spiritual in nature, and was guided by

Avalokiteshvara and the compassion he embodies. Also in the first verse quoted above he had referred to Yarlung as "...a piece of the heavens fallen to earth." This too is a reference to this secret nature.

Some texts also refer to a "most secret nature" or quality. When this is done, the reference is to the simultaneous presence of the three times: past, present, and future. This three-in-one aspect of time is sometimes called "the fourth time zone" in Tibetan literature. Here the sense is that a power place is like a looking glass through which all things of the past, present and future can be experienced. Tibetans, like so many of the ancient shaman cultures the world over, believe that a power site carries the *jin-lab*, or "transforming energies," of all the great beings of the past who have blessed it with their presence. An ordinary mortal might not leave much of an imprint on a place, but enlightened beings leave a fountainhead of transforming energies that endure forever. Buddhism holds that enlightened beings have achieved the wisdom of omniscience, and thus know all things in the universe in all three time periods. This simultaneous knowing of past, present and future is the most secret force that creates the fourth time zone. When we make *khorma* to a power place, we come into direct contact with this fourth dimension of time, because through our efforts, meditations, and positive attitudes we access the transforming energies of the enlightened beings who visited or resided there in the past. Because they dwelled within the omniscient wisdom that is the fourth zone, we can step into it ourselves through them. This is their most secret blessing.

However, ordinary individuals are limited in their experiences by their own karmic predispositions and spiritual inclinations. For this reason many of the power sites in Tibet are of special interest to particular groups. For example:

Practitioners of the Nyingma School will make every effort to make *khorma* to the major places associated with Padmasambhava and the great mystics who followed in his wake.

Sakya practitioners will focus on the places made famous by the seven early Sakya mystics.

Kagyupas will want to visit the power places associated with Marpa Lotsawa, Milarepa, Gampopa, and so forth.

Practitioners of any of the Sarma schools will make at least one *khorma* to the places of Central Tibet where the early Kadampa masters practiced and taught, such as Reting and Penpo.

Gelupas will be especially enthusiastic to visit and meditate in the Olkha Mountains near the Oracle Lake, where Lama Tsongkhapa achieved his enlightenment, and where so many later Gelupa masters made their long retreats.

Everyone will also visit the places of the others sects, of course, but one's primary spiritual interest should probably be in the places where the ancient masters who practiced one's own lineages lived and gained realization. One's karmic connections with them are especially strong, and therefore a *khorma* to their power sites has a far greater potential to affect one on all three

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levels: outer, inner, and secret. Outwardly one will understand and relate to the place more deeply on a conceptual level; inwardly one will more easily experience the emotional and spiritual energies embodied in the place; and secretly one has a far greater possibility of awakening the according divine energies and paradise-like qualities. Finally, on the most secret level, one might even temporarily trip into the waters of the fourth time zone, and unlock the secrets of our past, present and future. Seeing all three times simultaneously unlocks the doors to the unique clairvoyance that arouses powers such as memories of one's past lives, the ability to read minds, and so forth.

This happened to the Second Dalai Lama when he first visited Reting Monastery in 1495 and did a one-month retreat in a nearby Kadampa cave. He, like his predecessor the First Dalai Lama, had been born in Tsang, in southwestern Tibet. The First, however, had spent twelve years studying and practicing in central Tibet, and had made numerous meditation retreats in the Reting area. When the Second Dalai Lama made his retreat there, his memories of these previous lifetime experiences were awakened. In fact, it is said that he recollected hundreds of his previous lives at this time.

This "most secret aspect" of a power place is sometimes represented by the *dakinis*, the mystical female buddha forms that function as messengers from the occult world. Many of the early Dalai Lamas were guided by these spiritual beings

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throughout their lives. The First and Second Dalai Lamas in particular seemed to be in constant touch with them, and to have been instructed by them in every major deed of their lives. The First, for example, was told where and when to build Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, where and when to do meditation retreats, and so forth. The Second was guided in his work with empowerment of the Oracle Lake, the creation of Chökhör Gyäl Monastery, and many other details great and small in his life.

This *dakini* power is especially associated with the power sites, and is easily accessed through them. Sometimes this occurs through dreams, sometimes through meditational visions, and sometimes through spontaneous breakthroughs. No matter what form the communication takes, the revelation is usually life-transforming for the recipient.

I opened my discussion with a reference to a Tibetan casually stating that his greatest melancholy in America was the lack of *khorma* sites. For him, *khorma* represented all that is good, healthy, happy, uplifting and enlightening. Whether a one-hour daily *khorma*, a three- or four-day monthly *khorma*, a several-week-long annual *khorma*, or a several-month-long once-in-a-lifetime *khorma*, he looked forward to them with joy and pleasure, and as high points in his life.

Re-creating the *khorma* phenomenon in the West will certainly be a challenge. Land ownership over here is out of control, as is the bureaucracy surrounding it. Ninety-five percent of Tibet's land, on the other hand, was government owned, and thus was the equivalent of a national park. Much of this was leased and sub-leased for seasonal grazing, but it was otherwise protected. Power places were open to everyone, and the idea of destroying them to make way for a hotel or high-rise was not an option.

These thoughts floated through my mind while I was on a *khorma* in Tibet last year. It was a life hindrance year for me, but fate offered me a reprieve. It came in the form of an opportunity to make *khorma* both to Mt. Everest's north face and to Mt. Shizhi Pangma. The Tibetans associate both of these mountains with healing and longevity. In fact, Tibetans think of Everest as the greatest in a set of five sacred healing Himalayan

mountains, all of which are important *khorma* sites. Everest in particular is linked to the healing *dakini* Lhamo Tseringma.

Dozens of Tibetans came through Everest on pilgrimage while we were there. They, like us, made their way to all the sacred power places on the mountain: the spring that flows with nectars from Lhamo Tseringma's breast; Padmasambhava's cave, which was his first stopping place when he entered Tibet (his route into Tibet from India took him through Kathmandu, Solo Khumbu, and the eastern pass on Everest); the site where Milarepa practiced the tantric sexual yogas; and so forth. Like the Tibetan pilgrims, we collected mantras and prostrations at these unique repositories of transformative spiritual energies, and practiced meditation there.

While we were thus engaged, a group of twenty-four mountain climbers and secular adventurers had set up tents in the place designated by the Chinese government as "base camp." They showed little or no interest in the spiritual powers of this amazing mountain, but only in walking to the top of Everest and coming back alive with bragging rights. Two of them died the day we were meditating by the spring that represents the tip of Lhamo Tseringma's nipple. They had made it to the summit, but lacked the merits to get back down.

That night we drank deeply of Lhamo Tseringma's life-enhancing nectar waters, while the climbers had to content themselves with offering a toast of Russian champagne to their two dead friends. Some days later I ran into a few of them, and they mentioned the Chinese plan to build a hotel at base camp to make life (and death) more comfortable for future climbers.

No doubt there are certain things that the Tibetans can learn from us Westerners. However, there is certainly a lot that we can learn from them. The secret life of power places ranks high among these. Our Western civilization, which is so strongly based on a philosophy of utilitarianism, with everything being here for human consumption, at best regards the earth as a plaything, and at worst as an object of greed and indulgence. The view of the earth as a sacred support of sentient life, growth, and transformation is dangerously rare. The Tibetan tradition of *khorma* is a wonderfully simple yet effective remedy. ●

Glenn H. Mullin is the author of approximately twenty books on Tibetan Buddhism, and a translator of classical Tibetan literature. His most recent volume, *The Fourteen Dalai Lamas: A Sacred Legacy of Reincarnation* (Clear Light Publications) was nominated for the NAPRA Award, in the category of inspirational biography. A dozen of his books focus on the lives and works of the early Dalai Lamas, his special interest being the First, Second, Third and Seventh incarnations. Others of his titles include *The Practice of Kalachakra*, *Tsongkhapa's Six Yogas of Naropa*, *Readings on the Six Yogas of Naropa*, and *Living in the Face of Death: The Tibetan Tradition*. He studied with the Tibetan lamas in India between 1972 and 1984, and counts both Lama Zopa and the late Lama Yeshe amongst his most important teachers and inspirations.

