

5-12-2007

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Changing Woman and Yeshe Tsogyel: A comparison of Women's Roles in
Din4 and Tibetan Tantra Buddhist Traditions

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We are told in Sri Lanka that many in their reference to Buddha, state, “He is my Mother” (Hallisey, 2005). The solace of finding mother provides comfort in most Buddhist societies. The Din4 follow the mother in proximity of all life. This paper considers parallel significance for two mothers of tradition, who lead their respective followers to a life of spreading knowledge and wisdom. Yeshe Tsogyel is significant in spreading the teaching of Tantra Buddhism, and Changing Woman provides the Din4 the importance of family.

Both Din4 and Buddhist doctrine form from oral traditions. While Buddhism is formed on patrilineal traditions, Din4 follow a dominant dyad that is matrilineal, mother to daughter. From time past, the traditional words help the two communities to find solace in the mother, and give importance to the positions of women in their respective societies.

Dimensions of Buddhist traditions

The story of Buddhism begins with a prince, Gautama, who was destined to become either a great teacher or mighty ruler. Although his father protected him from life outside the palace, he set out to learn more; and learned that all people experience three (3) universal sufferings: sickness, old age, death, and one (1) way to remove suffering through renunciation. In seeing a serene holy man, he set out to seek the truth in renunciation, and left his worldly life. Living in the forest on roots and berries for six years, he asked if this was the true way to reach enlightenment. Just then, a young girl carrying a bowl of rice offered him the bowl of food. In taking the rice, the young prince found that the way

to enlightenment was neither in wealth nor poverty, but rather in the “middle way” (Tsomo, 6/8/2005).

Forming out of Hinduism, Buddhism is based on enlightenment from the basic three aims: “Kama, Artha and Dharma” (Sinha, 1980). Kama refers to pleasure; Artha is the duty to amass wealth and possessions for the benefit of the family; and Dharma filling of wisdom destiny to be freed from the cycle of death. (Sinha, 1980). These aims are seen as the faults of desire; Buddha’s’ encouragement offered the “middle way” path to remove these desires.

After fighting other temptations, the prince became Buddha, “the enlightened one”, taught the Four (4) Noble-Truths; 1) Life is suffering, 2) suffering is caused by desire, 3) to end suffering one must end desire, 4) to end desire one should follow the Eight (8) Fold-Path: Right Understanding, Purpose, Speech, Conduct, Livelihood, Effort, Alertness, and Concentration (Taber, 6/7/2005).

Buddha laid down many rules for the tradition; many of these traditions have become varied based on the spread of the dharma (word). However, most importantly, Buddha teaches the way to reach enlightenment is by learning about the “middle way”. All of life is desire, and to give in to desire requires you to be re-born until enlightenment. Rebirth tends to be Eons, involving the living in all forms of sentient beings to understand the different desires, and why those desires do not lead to enlightenment. Each sentient being has a particular desire that teaches the ills of life through their incarnation.

The teachings of Buddha are over self-control. The limits of self-control allow the consciousness to evaporate, never to be reborn. As human beings, our fortunate luck is to have consciousness, we are able to understand the Samsara, Wheel of Life (Tsomo, 6/8/2005). As our consciousness becomes stronger, we can also limit our desire to enter the first copulating couple. This allows us to be reborn in an even more fortunate position the penultimate, as a deity or demi-god, or Arhart (Gyatso, 6/7/2005; Tsomo 6/8/2005); then ultimately, to be reborn into the enlightenment of no self.

In Theravada Buddhism, the “middle way” is following the teachings of Dharma (Law). In Mahayana Buddhism, the way to enlightenment is on the sudden enlightenment to include meditation of the dharma. Mahayana Buddhism traditions including Zen, Tibetan, and Pure Land. Each Mahayana path practices 10 individual precepts to help control the desire. The teaching are used to limit: killing, stealing, abhorrent sexual practice, lying, speaking of others, taking intoxicants, coveting, anger, slandering other for your good, and insulting the three treasures (Blackstone & Josipovic, 1995).

Tibetan Buddhism is primarily in Southeast Asia, focused now in Nepal and Bhutan; major teachings are also seen in Northern India (Tsomo, 6/8/2005). The landscape in this area is remote, sparsely populated, landlocked, high, arid, and mountain-girded. Tibetan Buddhist monks use mandalas to depict their sacred geography.

Sacred teachings within the Tibetan community can include Tantra Buddhism. The practice of Tantra Buddhism is reserved for those practitioners who study the dharma to remove the desire of the flesh. The teachings are often practiced within marriage to encourage monogamy through heightened sexual awareness of climactic denial, and provide a means for contraception with the limitation of coitus interruptus. (Tsomo, 6/16/2005).

The Emperor of Tibet, Trisong Detsen, learning of Hindu Tantra as a method of removing Kama - sexual desires, contracted a Guru Rimpoche, Pema Jungne, to teach the people of Tibet this ancient craft. The story of Yeshe Tsogyel, tells of a woman who spreads the teachings of Tantra. Her life path provides an important model for “enlightenment”, but not without hardship.

Dimensions of Diné traditions

“The People” refer to themselves as the Diné. The term Navajo is a name imposed by the Spaniards. Out of respect, this paper will use the people’s term, Diné.

Diné Cosmology: Noh’iiz lee N’d22s y1

There are several Diné myths that link humans to the cosmos. The Diné creation story begins with the Air-Spirit people moving through four lower worlds.

The Fourth World held large beings that were of five fingers, but without solid bodies, the Holy People. The Air-Spirit people thrived and lived in the sacred land given by the

spirits. The Holy People wanting to find form, used corn to bring about the First Man and First Women, who were to lie together and flourish. The Man and Women fought and separated. While they were separated both found comfort in natural items, with women becoming impregnated by their deeds. The Monsters born were to roam the world providing illness to the beings.

However, the land was flooded and the First Man and First Woman found the opening in the sky to move to the next world. The first hogan was made by First Man to provide shelter for all in the new world. After emerging into the Fifth World, the Living World, Changing Woman was formed and eventually gave life to the Earth-Surface people. (Zolbrod, 1992).

The Earth-Surface People, moved around the land found between the sacred mountains. As the number of people grew they moved into differing groups taking the name of the lead woman and establishing kinship with other groups (Zolbrod, 1992). “The Place of Emergence is located in northwest New Mexico, in an area known as Dinétah” (NM, 2004)

Navajo tribal land, Diné Bikéyah (Land of the People), covers 27,000 square miles of land in northern Arizona, northwestern New Mexico, and southeastern Utah. This area is remote and isolated. Most roads are unpaved and impassable during inclement weather.

The Diné view their story in relation to others, individually and collectively. They are born to a clan, for another clan; these clans are from the holy people who help to determine the growth of the people. In social relationships, the traditional Diné is familial in acknowledging all clan members (Plawecki, Sanchez, & Plawecki, 1994).

“The Navajo world view is characterized by an emphasis on order, balance, and harmony” (Griffen-Pierce, 1997). In Diné traditions religion permeates all life. There are generally no formal buildings; however, it is important to control the environment in establishing an individual place for sacred activities.

The sacred lands consist of four mountains, ranging from Mt. Taylor (Tsoodzit) in Grants, New Mexico to San Francisco Peak (Dook’o’oosliid) in Flagstaff, Arizona; and Hesperus Peak (Diné nitsaa) in Hesperus, Colorado to Blanca Peak (Sis N22jini) in Mt. Blanca, Colorado. Tradition holds that all Diné are to live within this sacred land (Griffen-Pierce, 1997). “The Fifth World, they say, is held up by these four pillars made of white shells, yellow abalone shells, blue turquoise and black jet (Erdoes, 1979)”.

Priority of Space looks at time and the cosmology of Mother Earth and Father Sky. The Medicine Wheel life cycle is made up of four directions: east (birth), south (youth), west (adulthood), and north (death). All aspects of tradition are based on these directions; from the sacred lands, social responsibilities, place in matrilineal hierarchy, movement in a hogan, placement of living space and et. al. (Anderson, 1995)

Changing Woman, the most significant female, teaches the Dine the aspects of directional life, and the purpose of fertility to increase “the People”. Her rites are used to initiate young women after menses, and prepare them for motherhood.

Parallel Ideas for Dine and Tibetan Buddhist traditions

Peter Gold in his book “Navajo and Tibetan Sacred Wisdom: The Circle of the Spirit”, outlines four universal ideas between these two traditions (1994). The first concept is realizing the creation teachings (myths) that describe life. The second concept found is the practice of maintaining a balance in life. The fourth concept is in the sacred rites of transformation (Windstone, 2005).

Lady Yeshe Tsogyel and Changing Woman

Important to each tradition is the teaching of women. In Tantra Buddhism, Lady Yeshe Tsogyel leads the practitioners in the enlightenment from sexual desire, and in Dine tradition, Changing Woman leads the people in giving life. Each woman follows a similar life path.

Birth

In Tantra Buddhist traditions, it is told that Lady Yeshe Tsogyel was conceived from the union of two deities. The earth shook and Tantra chant filled the air. The body was born with a full set of teeth and hair to her waist. Within one month, Yeshe Tsogyel appeared to be the age of an eight-year-old; out of fear, her parents hid her away until she was ten. At the age of ten, Yeshe Tsogyel had the body of a mature woman. (Dowman, 1996)

Changing Woman, in Diné tradition, was transformed from the ear of a corn into an adult woman, and left on a mountainside (Zolbrod, p 179). Another description tells of her birth and the finding of the baby by a stranger. Within twelve days, Changing Woman was a young girl; and by the eighteenth day, she was a complete woman (Hausman, 2001). Another story tells that she walked in two days, talked in four, and began menstruation in twelve days (Schwartz, 1997, p 23).

Youth

Both women were soon pursued by suitors, and found themselves in the guidance of a spiritual male being. The teachings offered to the women allowed them to educate others to their secrets.

Two princes sought after Yeshe Tsogyel soon after her sixteenth birthday, neither of whom she found interest in marrying. To avoid war between the two, the King of Tibet, proposed his marriage to Yeshe Tsogyel. Finding importance in the tantric path and seeking the teaching, the King gives Yeshe Tsogyel to the Guru for Initiation. Women were to be a natural enlightened as dakini in the sexual act, for they already know what actions to undertake (Gyatso, 6/9/2005). Learning the practice of Tantra from the Guru, Yeshe Tsogyel was ultimately sent to find her own consort (Dowman, p 48).

After her transformation to an adult, Changing Woman and her sister, White Shell Woman, moved to the top of the summit where they could hear the wind. Although,

along with her sister, Changing Woman found herself lonely. The sun comforted Changing Woman; her sister was comforted by a stream of water. Soon both felt movement in their bodies, and each bore a child. Like their mothers, the boys were full grown within twelve days. Wanting to know who their fathers were, the two boys hid from their mothers and called the Spirits in hope of learning this secret. Changing Woman threw four magic hoops to the directions to keep the Spirits away; each hoop was a different color to protect the direction. In disgrace, the boys ran away to find their fathers, and soon they found their way to Spider Woman. Making them seats of special stones, Spider Woman told the two their fathers (Zolbrod, p 198). With this knowledge, the sons set out to fight the Monsters made during the separation of man and women.

Different translations see both Changing Woman and White Shell Woman as one person. In youth, she is White Shell, and transforms to Changing Woman with her menses. In late life, Changing Woman becomes the earth, to serve always the Earth Surface People.

Changing Woman upon turning twelve and starting her menses, ran for four days of solitude. This Kinaald¹ practice is continued today at the first menses, and is used to introduce the young woman to the world; and their possibility of reproduction. The girl is dressed in traditional clothes, and her hair is tied to allow the mind to retain the knowledge (Schwartz, 1997, p 188).

Later in her teachings Yeshe Tsogyel, leaves to find solace in a cave; to practice physical austerity. Tempted by demons that became familiar with her, she turned the demons into corpses and ugly creatures; and moves to a higher potential (Dowman, p 86).

Adulthood

Ultimately, in the struggle for enlightenment and balance, both women, Yeshe Tsogyel and Changing Woman are raped. Each tragedy is used to transform a negative into a positive.

Yeshe Tsogyel while traveling was robbed of her possessions and raped by seven bandits. In song, she informs them it is their good karma that they have been initiated in the four (4) level of joy: Vase Initiation, Mystic Initiation, Wisdom Initiation, and Initiation of Creative Expression. With this, she was rewarded with seven new disciples (Gyatso, 6/10/2005).

The rape of Changing Woman is symbolic, her disdain for those who destroy the world, is noted in her withholding of blessing (Hausman, 2001, p 9).

Those who take from her, rape her-spoil her
goodness. Those who steal
her treasure out of the soil
cannot know the beauty of
Changing Woman; nor can they harm her.
For her loyalty
is beyond our measure. (Hausman, 2001, p 9)

Motherhood

In order to transform from their previous position to Mother, both Yeshe Tsogyel and Changing Woman work with the aid of another. Yeshe Tsogyel works with Mandarava to learn the last teachings of Tantra, and Changing Woman returns to live with JOhona147, the Sun, to form the five (5) finger Earth-People.

Upon enlightenment by Yeshe Tsogyel, to the teachings not previously heard, the Divine Consort, Mandarava, sang a song,

O Sky-dancer, you have mastery of the Tantra;
...
You drank the nectar of Pema's precepts, gathering essences:
Surely you are the Great Mother of Perfect Wisdom!
(Dowman, p 149)

Changing Woman knew that in order to maintain harmony in the world, she must return to live as the wife of JOhona147, the Sun. She asks him to build her house to the West, just as he has a house to the east. This would encourage JOhona147, the Sun to sleep with her at the end of each day. Since she went to live in the West without her sister, to prevent loneliness, she asked for animals to keep her company. As she went with him, her body changed, "Whereupon her hips widened and her breasts fill out. She grew more beautiful in her womanhood so that she and her husband would flourish in the company of one another".

Lonely without her sister, White Shell Women taking white and yellow corn placed the ears under a blanket and chanted. The First Earth Surface People were formed. To make man and woman want each other, White Shell Woman took a staff of blue turquoise and

placed it between the man's legs, and then took a white shell and placed with between the woman's legs. Then she made them shout. The trickster Coyote took hair from his beard and blew the hair between their legs to make them even more attracted to one another.

As Changing Woman waited for JOhona¹⁴⁷, the Sun, he took longer and longer to cross the world to rest with her. The animals spread to the mountains and valleys, and once again, Changing Woman was lonely. Thinking of the Earth Surface People made by her sister, Changing Woman took skin from under her arms and breasts and formed 12 people.

To help the Earth Surface People, Changing Woman made them a hogan. Each part of the hogan is sacred. Stones representing the sacred mountains are placed in all four directions to aid in the protection of the home. Entering the hogan from the east, one moves only in a clockwise direction. As the family comes together at the hogan in blessing ceremonies, in some cases, a Sandpainting is drawn to allow the spirits intercession in the blessing (Griffen-Pierce, 1992).

Death

At the end of each Woman's lives, they moved to another space as Mother and giver of knowledge and life. Yeshe Tsogyel vanished, leaving the knowledge of Tantra to be spread; and Changing Woman changed in the eyes of her People as they spread within the sacred land.

Yeshe Tsogyel said her farewell past the age of 211 (p152), and “in splendid vivid colours, streamed towards the South-West and vanished from sight.” (Dowman, p 186)

After many generations, the Earth Surface People searching the earth learned of others like them, made from White Shell Woman. Thinking of them, they set out from Changing Woman to find new land and grow as a people. Giving them one last gift, Changing Woman presented each woman a staff of precious stone filled with magic, to use, as they would need in their travels. Ultimately, the people gathered into clans all who spoke the language of the Diné, and the People came to live in the sacred land.

Changing Woman is known as Mother Earth, and gives all life to the Dine. “She is the source of life, the giver of sustenance and destiny to all beings. As the Earth goes through seasonal changes- from the growth of spring and summer to the dying of fall and coming of winter- so Changing Woman can attain old age, die, and be reborn.”

(Hausman, 2001, p 13)

Conclusion

The parallel lives of Changing Woman and Yeshe Tsogyel follow the four concepts outlined by Gold (1994): the creation teachings (myths) that describe life, the maintaining a balance in life, centering of direction, and the sacred rites of transformation. Each concept leads to the defining of Mother.

Both women are remarkably mature even as infants. Each responds to a rape incident by reclaiming her power through song or chant. Neither wallowed in victimization or vindication, rather offering blessings to those who are adherent to the practice.

One major contrast between Yeshe Tsogyel and Changing Woman is that while both are the Mother of tradition, only Changing Woman gives birth to offspring. One speculation could be that in Buddhist teachings the path is to end the cycle of rebirth, the female function of giving birth is less important in its sacred tradition.

In the image of Changing Woman attempting to assuage her loneliness by making twelve human companions for her skin, Yeshe Tsogyel uses her motherhood to convert people into disciples to accompany her on her travels. Yeshe Tsogyel teaches her disciples control of desire through practicing the Tantra Four (4) Joys of Initiation. First Woman and First Man teach Changing Woman control of desire, which she practices daily in waiting for the Sun.

All of life and behaviors for the Dine and Tantra Buddhist relate to their creation story and the symbolic traditions. The Din4 objectives are to live the “Beauty Way” and to follow the medicine wheel; and the pattern of flow for the Tantra Buddhist is to find “the middle way”. As described in the parallel lives of Yeshe Tsogyel and Changing Woman, all of life’s patterns flow from the sacred and follow the pattern and transformation of the strength of women.

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