

Sanghadana

*A gathering of 2000 Buddhist monks in Ladakh,
and other interesting meetings on this day.*

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Sanghadana means the gift from the laity to the Sangha, to the community, in this case the monastic one. We lived for two days in a community of Ladakhist Buddhist nuns, 20 km from Leh upstream on the Indus River. I was with a friend from Auroville who had come for a brief discovery of Ladakh during her teacher's vacations. The Nyerma convent where we lived was built on the grounds of the first major Buddhist university in western Tibet, Thiksey, founded by Rinchen Sangpo in the 10th century. A movement in Taiwan, the *Chung-wa Association of Merits for Buddha-Puja and Sanghadana*, supported this great Sanghadana event financially. Since their inception in 2003, they have already provided 360,000 members of the Buddhist monastic community in both the Mahâyana and Theravâda countries with the benefit of their generosity. This association was helped on the spot by the *All Ladakh Gonpa Association*, which brings together under one umbrella all the monasteries in the region. The nuns of Nyerma told us that we could go to this event, so we did. There were exactly 2030 monks who gathered for this great occasion, with speeches from Rinpoches, Khempos (scholars in the Tibetan tradition), and also theravadin monks. The gathering place was almost on the banks of the Indus River, in Choglamsar below Leh, a place where Tibetan refugees settled 60 years ago, and where they have now become rather prosperous. It was not far from the large field, a square of perhaps 800 m on each side, where the Dalai Lama teaches every year in Ladakh, usually in July. He usually spends a month in the region, including a personal retreat. On his international tours, he does not hesitate to praise the Ladakhis by affirming that they live their Buddhist values in quite a coherent way.

For maybe half an hour, two Western women were there with us, then three others also spent half an hour, but we are the only two Westerners to have stayed throughout the ceremony, which took place from 10 a.m. to about 2 p.m. Because of the presence of the Taiwanese, some of the speeches were in English, so we were able to benefit from these translations. The nuns were in a minority, but still represented perhaps a third of the assembly. They and the monks persevered out placidly during the four hours of the ceremony without flinching; it must be said that a good meal was served to us in addition to various gifts that were offered to them, such as a large shawl, a shoulder bag, a thermos filled with tea, and also a large book of about 400 pages written in Tibetan but on which we could read the title in Latin letters *Mila I Mgyur Bum*, which means the thousand songs of Milarepa. Some monks started reading it at random, and others even discussed it among themselves. Probably, they had all

read and heard some Milarepa's songs, but perusing the complete edition is another matter. I did it myself about twenty years ago, and these are texts that can often be reread and meditated. Receiving such a book at the beginning of a Ladakhi winter where the temperature remains around -20° for three months is certainly a good incentive to study in the relative warmth of the house ("warm" for the Ladhakis in winter means around 5° Celsius in the kitchen, the warmest room in the house...). We also saw three young people about 30 or 40 years old, with the characteristic hat of the Drugpa-Kagyü order, who also wore, placed across the trunk, the white shawl of Tibetan yogis, in the tradition of Jetsün Milarepa. They were *togden*.

To better understand the context of these types of events, it can be noted that this was the fourth Sanghadana of the Taiwanese in Ladakh, but there had been a long interruption of 19 years since the third. The President of the Taiwan Buddhist Youth Association and at the same time President of the Mahâbodhi Society branch there acknowledged that being able to organize this great event was a miracle. There could have been even more monks, if not for the fact that most of the disciples of the Gyalwang Drugpa had been occupied by the Naropa ornament festival near the Hemis monastery, 30 km further upstream in the Indus Valley. We will come back to this at the end of this text.

We arrived in the morning at the same time as the monks themselves, and we walked with them through an impressive hedge of honour: it was composed of Mahâbodhi Society students in full traditional dress, including the girls in colourful Tibetan costumes. Once we arrived in the great panda, a huge tent that could accommodate 2500 people with multiple wooden pillars and side walls, we also had the Ladakh Buddhist women's hedge of honour, with their characteristic turquoise headdresses that descends like a blue river from the brow to the back of the shoulder blades. The Ladakhis male assistants had the traditional dress with the grey or black apron that looked quite similar to those of Bhutan, with a colored belt. With a lot of courtesy, we were made to sit on one side of the hall at the front row level, with the guests of honour.

A group of about 20 Taiwanese, mostly women, came to support and accompany their president, Mrs. Wang-Chou-You. If I understood correctly, it was she who had been the main financier of the event, or perhaps through a company that belonged to her. In any case, it was well organized. When these 2000 Ladakh monks and nuns began the prayers of thanksgiving, it seemed as if the whole surrounding Himalayas with snow-covered peaks were vibrating... and even without being particularly mystical or visionary, it was easy to imagine an apparition of Avalokiteshwara, Chenrezi - with his rainbow body and his thousand arms - dispensing his benefits in many directions!

The donation of shawls and other material objects was made in accordance with the rules of the art, with the recitation of ritual formulas and prayers on the part of the young women who gave these offerings to the monks and nuns. This tradition of giving to the community dates back to the time of the Buddha himself, and it was beautiful to see it realized with such strength and intensity, in this beautiful setting of the snow-covered peaks of Ladakh, on the banks of the Indus River. One should for instance remember that the Buddha had his life saved when he got some *payasam*, some milk rice from a young woman called Sujata. Moreover, with the presence not only of Taiwanese, but also of big Buddhist monks and nuns from Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the event became a manifestation of modern and global Buddhism. The main political figure in Ladakh, the president of the Autonomous Hill Council, was present and spoke.

To better understand the context of this event, we can talk about the Mahâbodhi Society of Leh. It was founded by Bikkhu Sanghasena, who organized and presided over the current celebration. Born around 1960, he joined the army early where he admits to having learned the virtue of discipline. However, his inner process of evolution matured, and he decided to go to Bangalore to study and become a monk in the Theravada tradition. He then returned home and founded a branch of the Mahâbodhi Society a few kilometers from Leh in 1996. In addition to a school of perhaps 300 students, he does considerable social work for the underprivileged classes of this Ladakh society that he knew well, being one of its members. In addition, he has done a considerable diplomatic work to bring Theravada Buddhists and Mahayana Buddhists closer to Ladakh. It was he himself who invited the great Taiwanese association to organize this event for Ladakhis monks. Then, it was a beautiful symbol of Buddhist unity beyond school differences that a theravadin monk could make the link between the Mahayanists of Taiwan and those of Ladakh, for the organization of a celebration of such magnitude.

The monks were divided into two groups on either side of the altar, on one side the Ladakhis, on the other side the theravadins and mahayanists from Taiwan, mainland China and elsewhere. At the place of honour for the Ladakh monks was a small tulku, a boy of about eight years old who seemed to be the reincarnation of one of the main monks of Ladakh, I did not quite understand which one. He had a natural behaviour, was certainly less immobile than the adult monks, but could already recite most prayers by heart, knew how to refuse a pack of fruit juices that were distributed after the meal, probably thinking that it contained too much sugar, and did not hesitate to plug his ears for several minutes when a rather modern drum band started playing ladakhi music of a modern popular genre: it was certainly a change from the grave psalmodies that emanated from this ocean of 2000 monks and nuns reciting sutras or thanksgiving in classical Tibetan....

Prayers for peace were at the order of the day, and they took a particular importance in this region of militarily sensitive Buddhist civilization in Ladakh, threatened by Pakistani Islamists in the west and Chinese Communists in the east: Ladakh has a population of 350,000 inhabitants, but is protected by still a larger number of Indian soldiers.

Mrs. Wang-Chu-You, a woman of perhaps 70 years of age in a pretty pink gown, the main donor of the event, distributed a leaflet of her association to the hundred or so main monks who were sitting at the front of the assembly. She also showed a large photo of the last Sanghadana event they organized in Taiwan, it was in a huge stadium with an audience of perhaps 20,000... Beyond the donation of food and material objects, it is about affirming the strength and unity of the Sangha and getting important messages across by the most prominent teachers in the community. Taiwanese donors received beautiful tankas from Buddha Sakyamuni (the historical Buddha) in gratitude from Ladakh monks and nuns. Diplomatically, they avoided offering them representations that were too tantric and that would undoubtedly have shocked them.

We mentioned the Naropa ornament festival in Hemis, 30 km upstream on the Indus River. Hemis is not the oldest monastery in Ladakh, but the one with the largest number of monks. Unlike most others, it is not proudly perched on a rocky ridge, but rather discreetly nestled at the bottom of a closed valley. The flowing river allows irrigation and the maintenance of a real oasis around the monastery. The community has preserved very old objects, which they exhibit in one of the best organized museums I have been able to visit in India in the 30 years I have lived there: one could especially admire Buddhist bronzes from 7th or 8th century Kashmir. There was a great Hindu and Buddhist culture in Kashmir

before it was destroyed by Islamic invasions from the 11th century onwards. Fortunately, it was able to be transferred to Tibet as for its Buddhist part, and the Hindu part was transferred to the Shri Vidya school in southern India.

Every 12 years, then, Naropa's ornaments are taken out, it is a great celebration that brings together several hundred thousand people, and a few hundred Westerners who are all housed in individual tents, so the whole affair represents a big organization. This year, there was a four-day minor version of this festival. It is both a cultural event with many traditional dances, performed in particular by the young nuns of the *drugpa kagyu* order. A group of Bhutanese also came to demonstrate their art of archery, and all this was intertwined with religious teachings in a festive setting that allows Buddhist Ladakhis to affirm their culture. Indeed, the Drugpa order that organizes this event has had roots in the region since its beginnings, i.e. the 12th century, and we feel that it has a dynamism of its own, for example, in the way it acts as a society. I could see it particularly through a large school, *Pema Karpo*, the White Lotus school that has influence throughout the region. In this sense too, in order to show to Ladakhis and Indians that it was necessary to count with the modern woman, Gyalwang Drugpa made a bicycle pilgrimage with 214 nuns in summer 2016 from Kathmandu to Leh, passing through several passes at an altitude of more than 5000 m on the road from Manali to Ladakh, to join the Naropa ornaments festival, which was returning after 12 years. The bike he used for this feat is on display at the museum of the Hemis monastery.

The, we went to visit the traditional village of Sabou, 5km above the Indus and Mahabodhi Society where we had participated in the Sanghadana. A French friend who knows Ladakh very well told us that it was one of her favourite villages and indeed, the view from there over the Indus Valley on the snow-covered peaks of the Zaskar Range to the south was impressive. We walked along a series of old stupas, passing by the left as tradition has it, we exchanged smiles with a teacher sitting on her chair under a tree and the little children on the ground around her, studying in the courtyard of the village school. There was also a vipassana meditation centre in this small town less than 10 km from Leh. Afterwards, on a path along a dry river, we met again a woman who invited us to have tea at her house.

Probably, she only very rarely saw Westerners pass by on this small path in front of her house. She was an unmarried Muslim woman who lived with her brother and sister at their mother's house. They were from an old Ladakh Muslim family. When I asked the brother if their ancestors had arrived in the area with Aurangzeb's troops who tried to invade Ladakh and ruin Buddhist culture without success in the 17th century, he strongly denied it. He obviously did not want to be associated with the great cultural destroyer that this Mughal emperor was. On the contrary, his family had been in the service of the Buddhist kings of Ladakh for centuries. Aurangzeb had admittedly imposed a Muslim wife on the king of his time, hoping that he would convert to Islam, but the monks saw in her a manifestation of Tara, and it was therefore she who was assimilated into the Buddhist system. Ladakhi, a dialect of Tibetan, and not Urdu, was the mother tongue of our hosts. Thus, they were among those Muslims who had long been part of Tibetan Buddhist culture. He told us that he was a personal believer in his religion, but he had little time to go to the mosque. Perhaps it was also because he did not agree with the content of the preaching that was given there, often centered on group emotionalism and feelings of persecution. In Lhasa too, since about the 16th century, there has been a Muslim community. There was talk at one point of sending Tibetans to a Muslim university in the Middle East. The Dalai Lama thought first of the members of that community, but the university teachers let him know that they would prefer

to receive Buddhist Tibetans, so that they themselves could learn something new from them... I don't know what this project was followed up.

Another very interesting meeting we had the same day, just after tea at the Muslims' house, was with two traditional Buddhist painters. They worked for two years to make the frescoes of a temple of Padmasambhava on a hill that dominated the whole valley of the Indus. This building had been inaugurated in 2012 by the Dalai Lama, but the murals had yet to be completed. I was able to talk in Hindi with these two artists. They explained to me that they were working with books that described the representations to be made, but that after this, their painting came purely from their visualizations, they did not copy a model. One of the two who seemed the most advanced was therefore studying what was written in a Tibetan book, from this he drew directly fine lines on the white wall, and the other followed step filling the sketches with color. About their way of working, one of them repeated several times in English "everything comes from the mind"! This could be seen as a direct reference to one of the four great schools of Tibetan Buddhism, *Chittamatra*, whose name means "only, *matra*, mind, *chitta*" in Sanskrit. The idea is that all our representations of the world passes through our mind, and is therefore conditioned by this mind.

Going further, we could distinguish two types of manifestations of this spirit: the ordinary material world, with its imperfections and contradictions, which is a manifestation of the *sem*, the dualist spirit of samsara. The second manifestation is that of *yeshe*, the primordial non-dualistic, glorious consciousness of nirvana, it is unified-purified and gives rise to the visions of the different paradises, the so-called Buddha fields and the four bodies: manifestation body, subtle body, fundamental body and spontaneous body, respectively *nirmâna*, *sambhoga*, *dharma* and *svabhava-kâyâ*. In the Christian tradition, we would probably speak of a body of glory. Certainly, the concentration of these painters was sattvic as they say in Hinduism, that is, pure and luminous. They devoted two years of their lives focused on the walls of a cube of about fifteen meters of ridge, living in a world of Buddhas and saints, an experience somehow worthy of Fra Angelico in the cells of his convent in Florence. For example, one of the two painters explained that he was representing Padmasambhava, Sangharakshita and the King of Tibet who collaborated to found the monastery of Samyé, southeast of Lhasa, around 670. So it's as if he were one with them right now. The temple with its wide view over the Indus Valley was very quiet, visitors must have been rare, so the two painters had time to live for two years in their world of light, and in addition benefited from the possibility in the future to involve in their vision the faithful who would frequent these places.

May this text help to communicate to readers some of the powerful energy of Ladakh, especially the songs and meditations of the 2000 monks and nuns who recently gathered near Ley for this day of donations to the Sangha.