

*Tibetan Buddhism is a sophisticated system of belief, a 'science of mind'.*

*It sees the world as a continuum of ever-changing interconnected forces – a view easily reconcilable with relativity theory physics.*

hesitate. They are, people believe, seeing through the eyes of the gods painted on their chests and backs.

Matho is in Ladakh, India's most northerly Himalayan outpost, squeezed between Kashmir and Tibet. Its inhabitants are of Tibetan origin and speak a strong Tibetan dialect. The religion is a rich mix of ancient animism and Tibetan Buddhism. Country people still worship the gods of their hearths, their villages, springs, trees and mountain passes.

What we in the west call chance hardly exists in their world. If you slip on a high trail and fall, you have offended a god. Death hovers near in this immense mountain landscape, so the westerner quickly adopts Ladakhi ways. I always carried a protection cord given me by a local priest, and chanted a 'mantra' on dangerous trails, to keep the 'bad luck' at bay. Was I protected, I asked myself, because I felt clear and protected, or because the gods were good to me?

What indeed is the difference? When the great tantric yogin, Padma Sambhava, came to Tibet and Ladakh he is said to have fought with the gods of the old religion, and conquered them. Instead of destroying them, however, he made them swear to protect the Buddha. The people of Ladakh, therefore, can continue to worship their ancient gods, alongside the Buddha, because the old gods are now *de facto* Buddhists.

On the one hand this was simply a sensible device whereby one creed could supercede another without resort to persecution and iconoclasm. Yet Tibetan Buddhism is also a sophisticated system of belief, 'science of mind' as much as religion. It sees the world as a continuum of ever-changing, interconnected forces



Left: The shaman spits out liquid after sucking at a sick patient's body. Below: The perak or headdress worn by the women is their dowry. Right: The Buddha Maitoeya, or Future Buddha, is carved from juniper wood and is more than 1,000 years old. Below right: An ancient chorten, a sacred Buddhist monument holding the relics of a powerful priest. In the walls below are meditation cells for the monks.

– a view easily reconcilable with relativity theory physics. Schools of Tibetan Buddhism have developed meditation practices designed to cut through our segmented world view to this other unfiltered, undivided 'reality'. These practices involve intense visualizations, such as those undergone by the monks of Matho. Given that the monks of Matho performed a feat beyond our normal 'reality', and I have simply related what I saw, were they able to do this because possessed by gods, or because visualizations of the gods' images tore down the barriers of their minds, of 'reality'? And again, what is the difference?

The smell of juniper incense hangs

in the air, warding off evil spirits. A man sits cross-legged against the far wall of the kitchen, chanting fervently. Grasping a small hand-bell he rings it, harsh and fast. His whole body starts to shake convulsively, like an epileptic entering a fit, as his pupils disappear under his eyelids.

He sneezes twice, then runs from the room to splash water on his head. Returning he frantically dons the *lhaba*, the shaman's 'uniform' – a crown of Buddha images, red scarf covering the mouth, brightly embroidered red and yellow apron, and clapper drum made from human skull grasped in one hand. A short rope hangs from his little finger, the road from heaven for the god who



has now possessed this man – a civil servant in everyday life.

A tall man approaches the shaman and placing the honorific white scarf across his crown asks a question. The shaman throws barley grains on to his drum's skin, then answers, interpreting how the grains have fallen. Again, chance assumes meaning. His voice is high-pitched, thin and reedy.

The man complains of an illness, is told to open his robe. Probing around the man's stomach, the shaman removes his mask and places his mouth against the chosen spot. For half a minute he sucks, then spits out a thick stream of shiny black liquid into a plate of ash. He grasps a hot knife straight from the fire and holds it on his tongue. Steam sizzles. Finally the shaman spits several times on to the man's stomach where he has been sucking, and issues further instructions – to hold a religious service, to visit several sacred sites. Another 'client' comes forward, then another. One he screams at furiously, slapping him across the back with his rope. The last is the wife of this house.

She approaches, bowed, hands joined in supplication. Suddenly the shaman shouts, half bellow, half growl, and jumps up, grabbing the long sword lying next to him. He draws the blade across his outstretched tongue. People jump forward to restrain him, but the tongue is cut.

He runs out of the house, to a corner of the wall, and starts to dig in a frenzy with his sword. He directs a three-foot hole to be dug, then chants purification prayers over it, brandishing the fearful weapon angrily, again cutting his tongue before the crowd can restrain him. He cuts himself, I am told, when angered by evil spirits.

Two brothers live in this house, married to the same wife, polyandry, illegal but common in Ladakh. There had been bad feeling, and the shaman was summoned to root out the evil spirit which had caused this, which he located in the corner of the house. His work was certainly effective. The atmosphere next day reverted from brooding anger to elated goodwill, and remained so for many months. After the trance, this sceptical westerner was allowed to inspect the shaman's tongue. It was unscarred.

