



ANIMISM AND TIBETAN BUDDHISM

# 'The still point of the turning world'

*Rituals and beliefs can be as important to a society's well-being as its agriculture and economy. In Himalayan Ladakh ancient shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism have proved a healthy combination.*

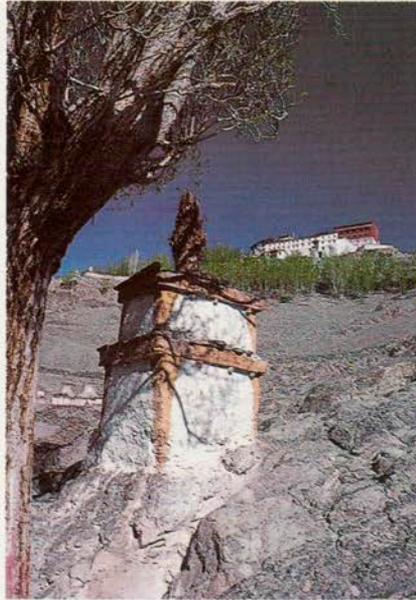
WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY TIM MALYON

**T**wo monks wearing black boxer shorts occupy high stools in the centre of the darkened room. A narrow shaft of light from the ceiling illuminates their freshly bathed bodies.

Two men work on each monk, their task is precise. First they paint the monks' entire bodies a shiny black, then trace the outline of a face in white on their chests and backs. Finally they add colours, reds, yellows, greens, with flames around the mouths and eyes.

The monks have been meditating for a year, alone for the last two months. They have been visualizing the faces now painted on their bodies, etching every last detail on their minds until at last they are possessed by them. These are the faces of the two gods who have protected this monastery, Matho, for six centuries.

The painters continue their task, working with frenzied, yet exact haste. As the faces near completion, the monks' own faces start to contort. Their eyeballs flick up under



*Above: The Buddhist monastery of Matho and in the foreground a lhatho house of a local god. Below and overleaf: A masked monk in a cham or mystery play.*

their eyelids, their bodies shiver, and they utter tense, clipped cries of pent-up energy.

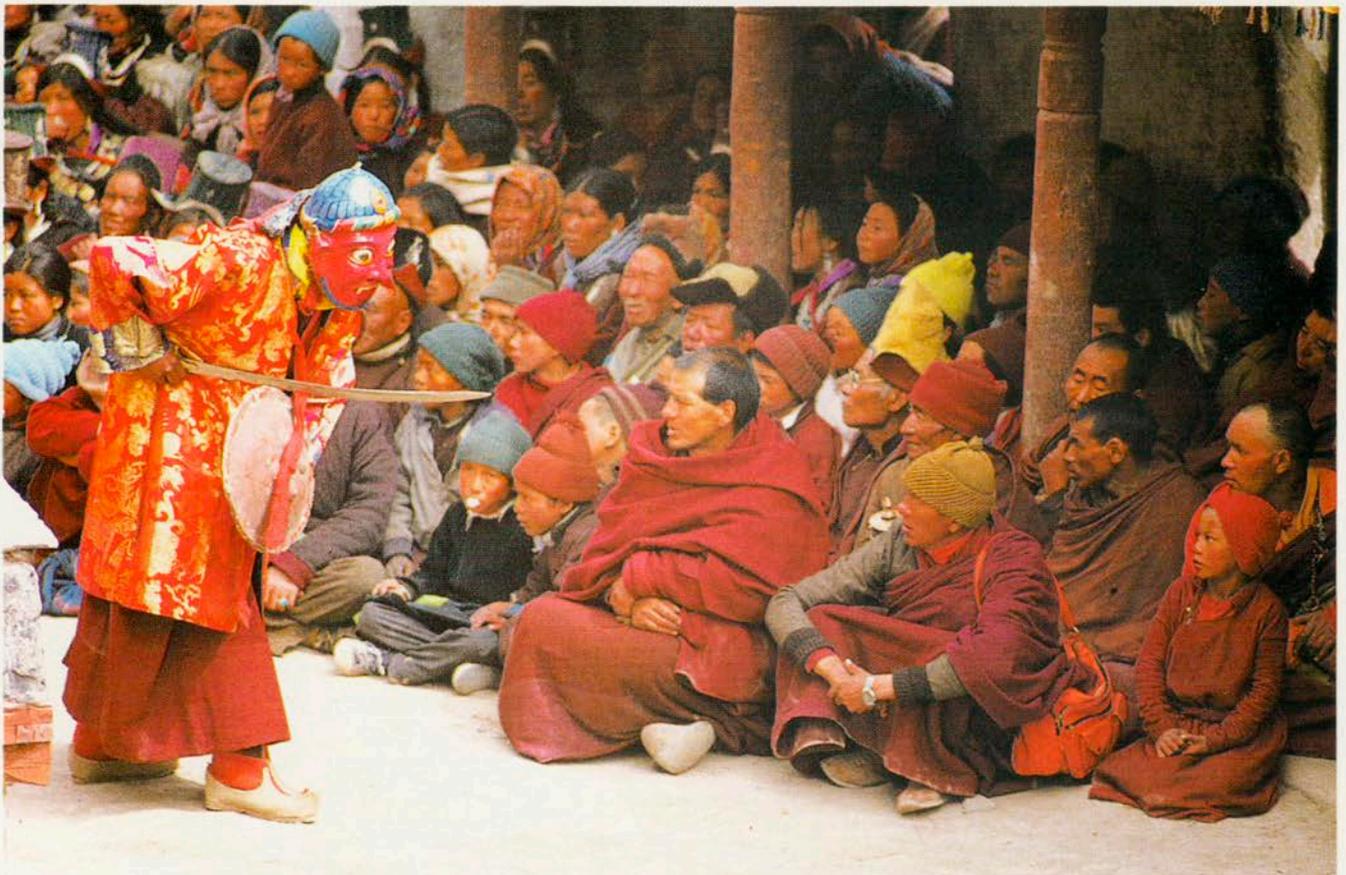
Outside a vast throng has gathered, the air hangs thick with dust and tension. People have travelled from

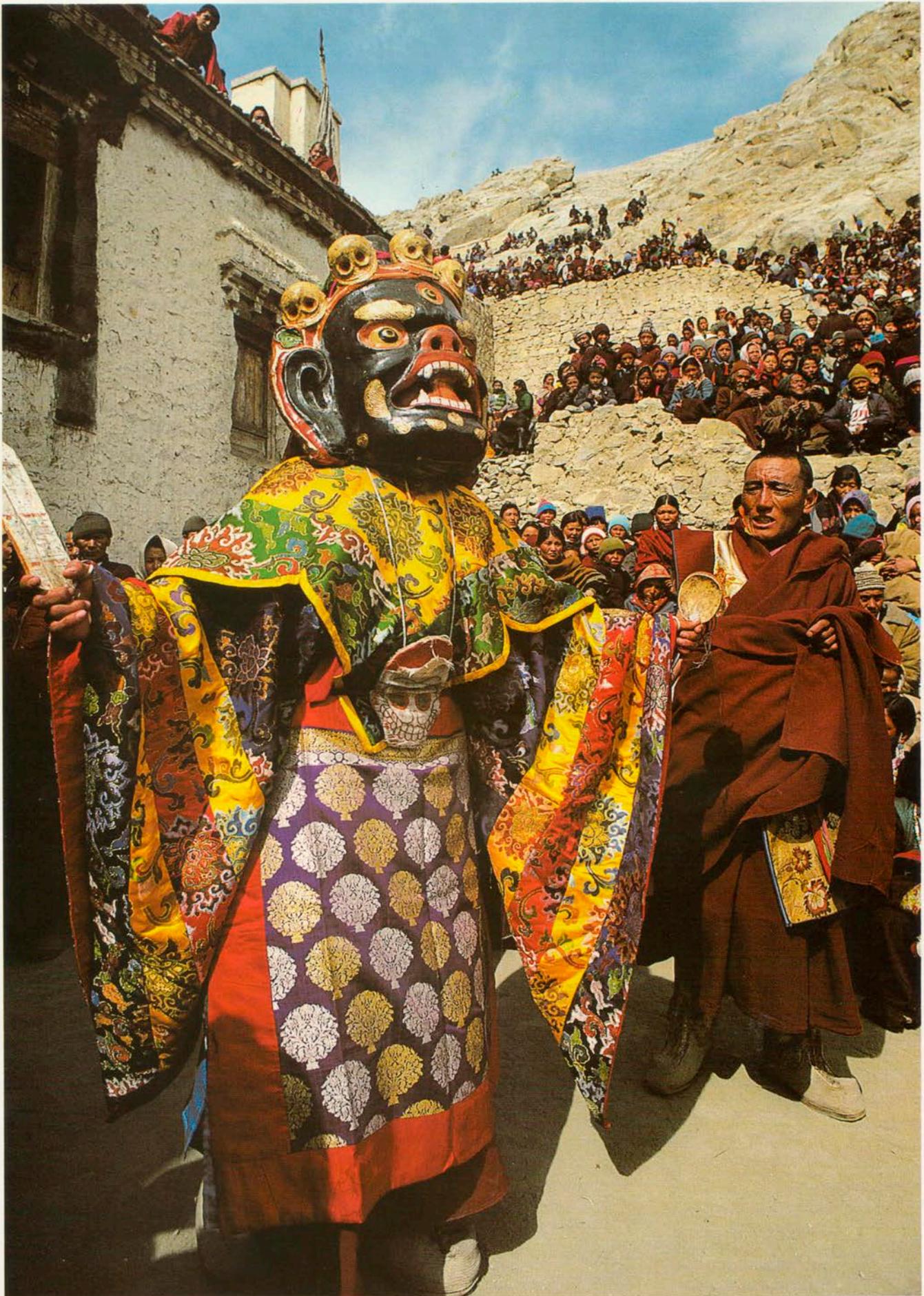
all over Ladakh, and fill the monastery courtyard and balconies above, straining forward to catch a glimpse. If your child is sick, or the crops have failed, every year this is the place to ask advice from the gods, the oracles.

Suddenly a great shout rings out – “ki ki so so lha ge lho” – “may the gods be victorious”. The monks appear, sprinting along a narrow parapet, perhaps nine inches wide, dusty and sloping. If they fall, they will be broken on the rocks below.

Around their waists are tiger skins. And on their heads are huge wigs, long and matted like Rastafarian dreadlocks, covering their entire faces. Under these wigs are seven bandages wound tightly across their eyes. They are blindfolded.

For nearly two hours they run around the monastery and hill below, blessing sacred sites, answering villagers' questions. In one hand they carry a little clapper drum, made from a human skull, in the other a wooden rod of authority. I follow. They never slip, never stumble, never





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

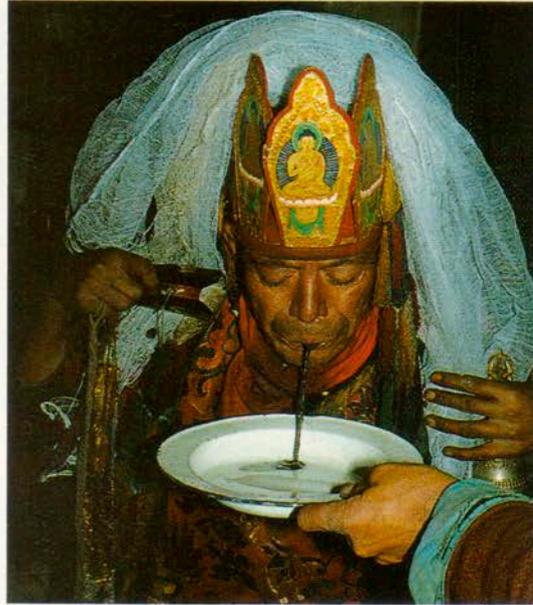
hesitate. They are, people believe, seeing through the eyes of the gods painted on their chests and backs.

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.

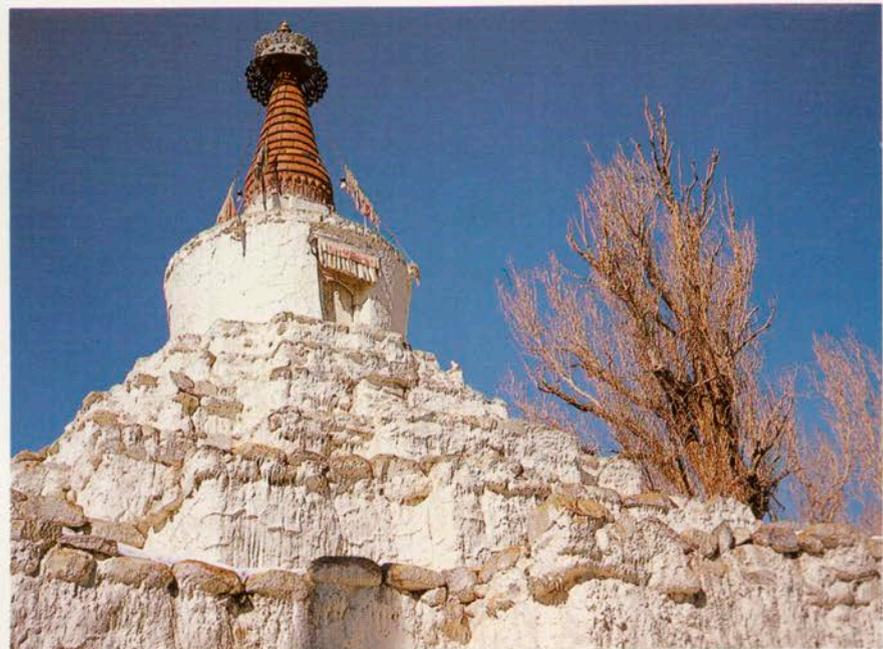
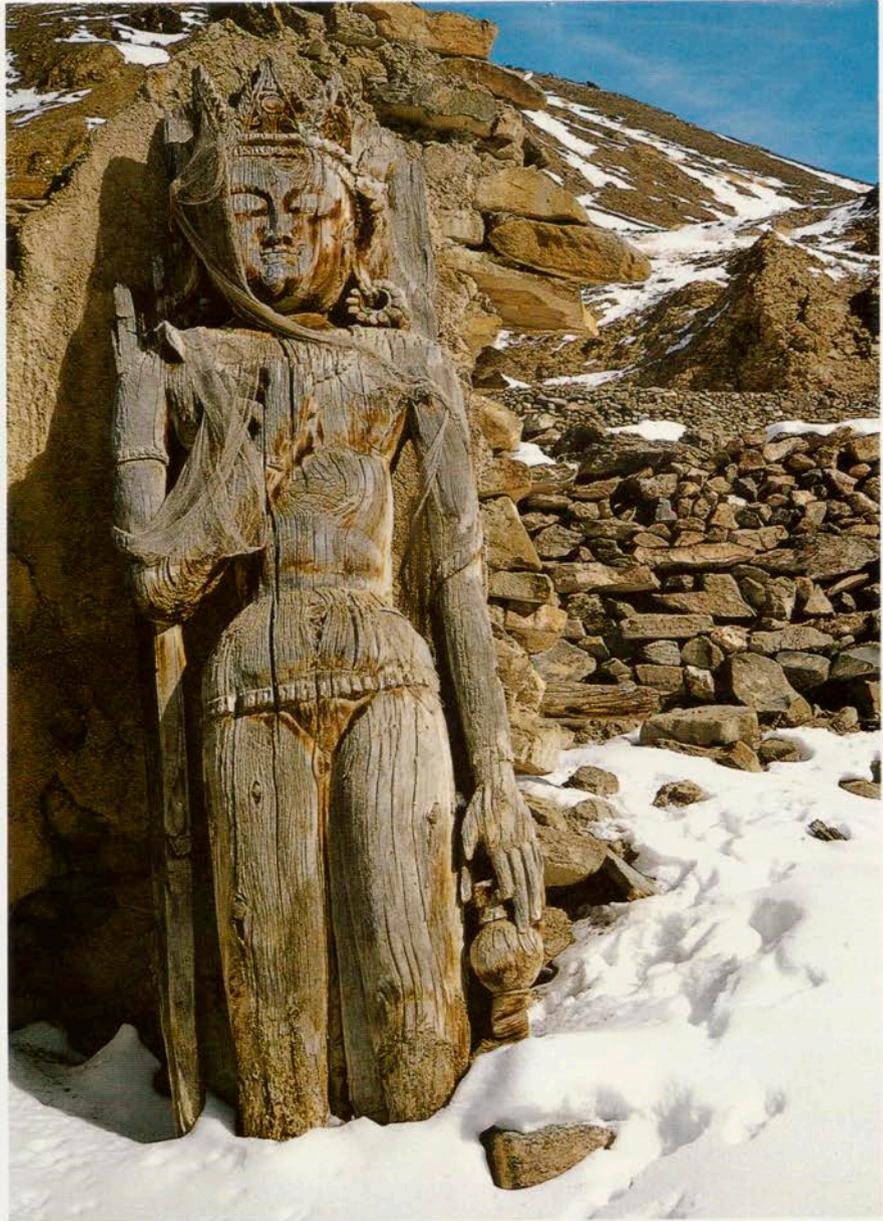
A tall man approaches the shaman and placing the honorific white scarf across his crown asks a question. The shaman throws barley grains on to his drum's skin, then answers, interpreting how the grains have fallen. Again, chance assumes meaning. His voice is high-pitched, thin and reedy.

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.



"These are people like the shamans of old who can induce trance states relatively easily, using standard techniques, the ringing of the bell, the beating of the drum," explains Dr John Crook, reader in psychology at Bristol University and co-author of a forthcoming major study, *Himalayan Buddhist Villages*. "In repeated movement these bring about altered states of consciousness."

"Within that altered state of consciousness this evocation of another being takes place, the wide changes in voice tone, profound changes in posture, and an extraordinary ability to be insightful about 'the client'."

"Answers given by shamans are by no means daft, they are often absolutely to the point. But the insight is made by a transformed person. You can't really say a shaman in this transformed state is not the same person as in his everyday life. The person has changed himself into somebody else for that time. This isn't an illusion, or a game, there really are very profound psychological processes taking place."

There is a danger in writing about other cultures to idealize or condemn, rather than looking within, at the context. Yet I do believe the Ladakhi mind is very healthy, despite gruelling hardship and stress in this tight-knit society. There are no Ladakhi beggars; there was no theft or murder before tourism arrived; the indigenous Snow Leopard is not hunted for sport or money; the tree count is growing; and the people are full of laughter.

Both elements of the belief system must take some credit. On the one hand the shaman is an outlet for stress, an environment where villagers can release tensions and griefs, even in some cases be confronted directly with hidden deeds and thoughts.

And complementing this ancient system, which originally sanctioned animal and human sacrifice, is Tibetan Buddhism, a religion which emphasizes non-violence and compassion. It also channels a vital human drive, the desire for personal experience of 'enlightenment', the urge to feel in T. S. Eliot's time-honoured description 'the still point of the turning world'.



### Of Landslides and Yaks

Ladakh is a dry land, in the rainshadow of the Himalayan front range. Fields and trees must be irrigated from streams which rise on the high glaciers. Houses are built with mud bricks, not designed to withstand heavy rain. The arid landscape has few wild trees and shrubs to hold it together if rain does fall.

In the last five years the weather has changed, manifesting freak and heavy storms. During two days in 1986 more rain fell in Leh, the only town, than during all 1984. This trend is continuing, causing massive landslides and land erosion.

Kaya village, two days' walk from the nearest road, has suffered badly. Some farmers have lost half their cultivatable land. The Save The Children Fund (SCF) is even now costing a mile long irrigation channel down a precipitous valley to bring new land under production. Help, however, sometimes comes from other, unexpected quarters.

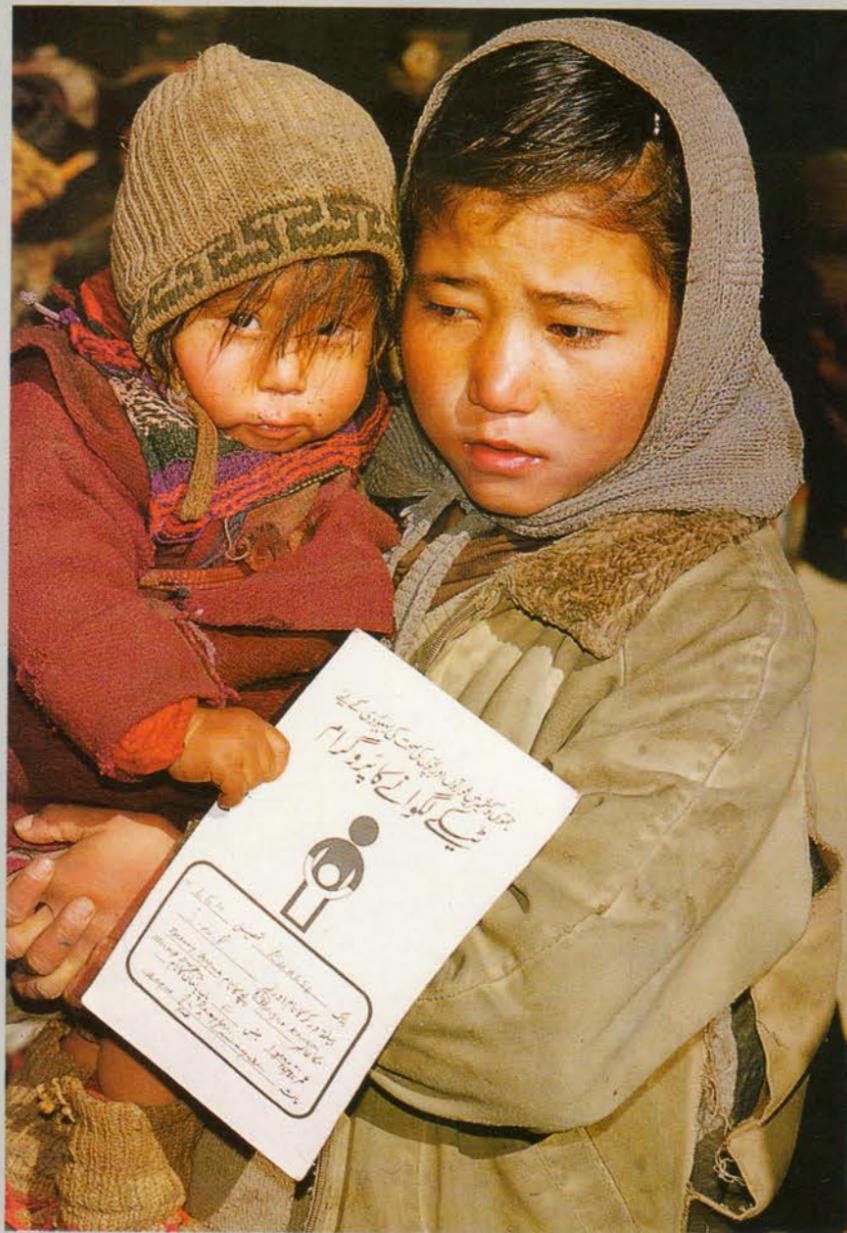
A massive landslide came down a valley above the village last year threatening several houses. The former SCF Field Director in Ladakh,

Sandy Macaulay, and David Stott, a civil engineer from Tameside Council on secondment to SCF are inspecting the site. Directly in the path of the landslide was the village shrine, the 'lhatho', house of the village god. It's a mud and stone construction, topped by a bundle of sacred juniper, certainly incapable of withstanding such an onslaught. Yet the landslide, higher than the shrine, simply divided and went round it. David Stott is astonished: "The lie of the land would encourage the landslide to totally destroy the shrine. And what happened is that the landslide separated. Not one brick of the shrine has been disturbed. In 25 years' experience of designing roads and retaining walls I honestly can't see any reason within engineering why that shrine escaped destruction."

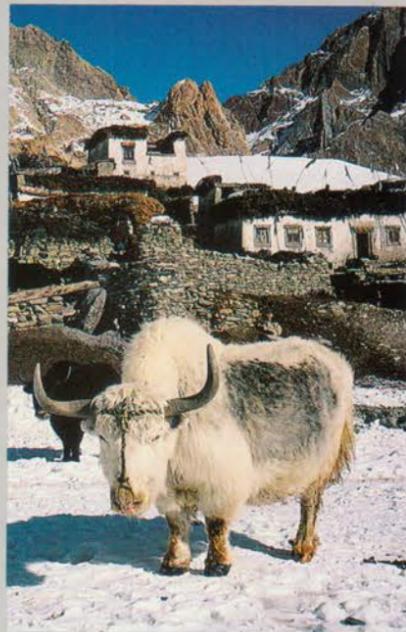
Sandy Macaulay has seen it before. Last autumn, in another village, a landslide threatened to destroy one man's entire barley crop: a year's food for his family, which was neatly stacked behind a *chorten*, a sacred monument.

"The landslide came straight down, heading directly for the chorten," Sandy explained. "And then it split apart around the chorten and met up again below it, covering everything on either side. Not one ear of barley was touched."

*Above: A typical Ladakhi house in winter with animal fodder stacked on the roof. Yaks are an important part of village life and a yak programme has been started to maintain livestock levels.*



Left: A child clutches her vaccination certificate. Measles has been a killer disease in Ladakh but vaccination has virtually wiped out the problem. Below: A community Yak wandering in Kanji village.



To cope with floods and landslides SCF has been helping villagers build 'bunds', dry stone walls held together by a net of wire. These shrine experiences, however, have suggested another ingredient for bunds. Sandy Macaulay explains:

"We agreed to build a bund where a family wanted it on the condition they would build a small chorten on top of the bund to protect it, and also a much larger chorten on the mountainside, next to where the bund was to be built, to protect the whole structure, the rationale being that if they have faith in the chorten, that faith will protect the bund. The villagers are a little self-conscious in raising these issues with us. But if we respect local traditions, which may mean acknowledging that there are forces at work which we can't explain or hope to understand, then I feel it helps greatly the relationship between the project and the village community we serve."

For SCF's main focus is community development, a far-sighted imaginative programme both to hold famine at bay and ensure this culture thrives on its own resources and skills. SCF is spreading indigenous crafts, especially brassmaking, carpentry and tailoring to poorer villages, so the young can earn a good living and not weaken the community by migrating.

Right: Mémé-Lé Phuntsog, an 84 year-old master brassworker. SCF is helping to spread this craft to remote villages to increase their incomes and stem urban drift.



And there's a 'community yak programme', supplying breeding yaks to remote villages to maintain livestock resources. The medical component is similarly focused on local needs. It trains medical assistants for the remote villages while also supporting the indigenous Tibetan medical system which has suffered since contacts with Tibet were severed. SCF employs a project *amchi*, Tibetan doctor, to oversee this task.

The guiding principle is community consultation and involvement: staff continually travel for days and weeks on foot and by horse, attending village meetings, discussing problems, inviting project suggestions. I saw this in action, and it's true 'grassroots up' development.

Now the last British Field Director has left and the organization, still funded by SCF, will be run by the Ladakhi staff, accountable through a Ladakhi management committee to their own community. It's a logical conclusion, the staff have always been Ladakhis apart from the Field Director.

This project is a hopeful example in an often gloomy aid scenario, a community assuming responsibility for its own continuous development so that it may grow in health and with respect. It deserves continuing support, and emulation elsewhere.

It costs SCF £88,000 a day to help more than five million children worldwide. If you would like to help, please send your donation to: Save the Children, Dept 8502002, 17 Grove Lane, London, SE5 8RD.

BBC RADIO FOUR WILL TRANSMIT SNAPSHOTS OF THE ROOF OF THE WORLD - RADIO PICTURES OF LADAKH BY TIM MALYON ON TUESDAYS AT 11.50AM-12 NOON, BEGINNING 10TH MAY FOR FOUR WEEKS.