The Doctrine of the Incense Homa

T. C. Gyatso

History of Incense Homa

In Tibet, I consider that Incense Homa was in existence before the introduction of Buddnism. I cannot say this with certainty, since there is no historical evidence as yet to prove my theory. It is certain, however, that, from the early seventh century, it was practised at the time of King Sroṅ-btsan sgam-po, the first great King and patron of Tibetan Buddha-Dharma, and by his descendants and subjects. He was justly renowned, not only in Tibet but also in other Asian countries, specially during his own reign.

The King increased considerably the prestige of his kingdom among neighbouring countries, so much so that the King of Nepal and the Emperor of China considered it prudent to effect alliances with the Tibetan King, and during the middle of the seventh century offered him their daughters with precious dowries, such as two images of the Lord Buddha-Sakyamuni and many other unique objects.

In the same way, King Sroṅ-btsan sgam-po sent two missions from his Court, headed by Mgar and 'bre to China in order to establish relations between the two countries and to ask in marriage one of the daughters of T'ang T'ai-tsung, Emperor of China, who accepted the proposal of the King. On their return journey with the princess, the ministers and their retinue arrived at a place called Sgo-doṅ sgo-mo, where the local Chinese deities were angry at the unfortunate loss of their princess, Wun-śin-koṅ-jo.
In that place, a heavy fall of snow had broken many tree-branches which blocked the road. So they had to stop for two months in this area. But Mgar ston btsan yul 'khor srun, the wise minister of the Tibetan King, who had been obliged to stay behind for political reasons, reached the place where they were then trapped. There, he and his assistants performed the Incense Homa, offering many items to the local deities, after which ceremony, the snow stopped. Therefore, there is no doubt that the Incense Homa was performed in Tibet at that time.

Preparation for the Incense Homa

The incense hearth is usually prepared in the open and in a clean place, such as the top of certain mountains or hills, a river bank, on the roof of a house or at a site reserved for regular performances. Many types of aromatic trees, medicinal leaves and other ingredients are neatly placed on one side. On the other side, the sign of the Gyuñ-druñ, called in Sanskrit “Svastika”, is drawn on the white sheeted altar, in barley or some other grain. On one side, a lance with a flag of glossy silk is hoisted.

Also, neatly arranged, there is a set of the seven kinds of Pūjā (offerings), usually: the two kinds of bowls of water (Arghas) <chu-gnis> and the five symbols of pleasures of the senses (Pañcopaćāra) <ñer-spyod sna-lna>. These are the Puṣpa(flower), Dūpa (incense), Āloka(lamp), Gandha (aroma) and Niveda-eatable food, which are placed on the altar, just in front of the Gtor-ma, Bali (oblation), prepared according to the correct Rituals for a large ceremony. On another side, a font to contain the water from rivers and other sources is used for the sprinkling of the purification water. On this altar, there are also precious powders, various flowers and many kinds of foods and clothing, placed as offerings for the Incense Homa.

On the front table for the Ācarya (celebrant), the Vajra (thunderbolt), Ghañtā(bell), a small Damaru(drum, with whipping knots), the sacred objects for the ceremony, a bowl of grains, which is the symbol of flowers, as well
as other ritual items, are systematically arranged by the assistants officiating at the ceremony. After that, a heap of perfumed branches and leaves is burnt. These offerings are placed in the mouth of the fire at set intervals, as in the case of the Homayajña (sbyin-sreg), by assistants with offering bowls, the Acarya and others are chanting rhythmically the ritual recitation with great reverence.

At the same time, other assistants are blowing white conches, beating large drums, clashing cymbals and many other instruments towards the sky, which is filled with smoke clouds coming from the burning of the perfumed branches and leaves. The Incense Homa can still be performed, even if all these offerings are not available, but only one set of the seven offerings, placed precisely on the altar with the barley-flour mixed with butter and also the offering of tea, barley or rice-spirit (gser-skyems) and boiled milk. The incense branches are burnt and then are recited the chants of the Incense Homa which are reserved for morning performances.

**Items for Incense Homa**

Generally, one can present to the guests invited at this ceremony, all the offerings which represent universal pleasure-giving objects in the worlds of sentient beings, Nāgas (serpents) and Heavens, according to the Buddhist doctrine. To ensure the success of these oblations, or of any other Buddhist offering, the residue is never used, but only fresh and purely prepared substances, exception being made for the low class residue users. This applies not only to this Incense Homa but to all Buddhist oblations. The two water bowls and the five symbols of the pleasures of the senses (pañcápäcāra in Sanskrit) are frequently used at various Buddhist ceremonies.

The Argha offering is divine water, Pārda is the water for the purification of the whole body or of the hands and feet, Puśpas are flower offerings of the human and heavenly worlds. Dhūpa is the perfumed Incense that
is both natural and man made, Āloka is a lamp of butter which represents gems, the sun, the moon and all luminous objects. Gandha is an aroma to perfume the whole body, Niveda represents edible or divine foods and Śabda symbolizes various instruments of pleasing sound such as cymbals. The five pleasures of the senses, which are: Rūpa (forms), Śabda (sound), Gandha (aroma), Rasa (food), Sparśa (clothing) and others, should also be given in the Incense Homa Ceremony.

The preparation of the Gtor-ma-Bali (oblation), for Incense Homa, includes the mixing of barley-flour with other foods of various shapes, as described in the specific texts, amongst which the shape of divers animals in moulded butter, rice, barley-flour and other substances, which are: the yak, the sheep, the goat (according to Bonism), as well as the deer, the burrhele-sheep, the Tibetan go-ba, the gñan, the rhinoeeros and others. The heaps of barley-flour should also be mixed with the three kinds of white foods, namely: curd, milk and butter, and the three sweets: molasses, honey and sugar. Then, tea, rice or barley-spirit, boiled milk and other items are placed on the altar.

Especially for the Incense Homa Ceremony, aromatic branches and leaves, such as juniper, sandal-wood, aloe, acacia, bamboo, birch, talśa (baloo), madhuka tree, akaru, arura, manuruta and many other kinds of trees and leaves are burnt. In the same way, jewels, gold-nuggets, uncut precious stones, various kinds of grains and fruits, heavy silk cloth, sea shells and the skins of tigers and other animals are used. All these offerings are consecrated by the Mantric Ācarya through meditation, mantra (recitation) and mudrā (symbolic hand gestures), so as to give great pleasure to the tutelary divinities and other guests of the mercy.

The Contemplative Visualization of Incense Homa

When the celebrants begin the main Incense Ritual, having previously taken refuge in the Tri-ratna (the triple gem), the spirit of the Bodhicitta
grows with the sense of compassion, the awareness of non-duality and of a
good mind, together with the four aspects of the measureless states. Then,
realizing that all the phenomena are a total Void in the nature of the
śūnyatā, they start to recite this mantra “Om svabhāva-suddhaḥ sarvadharmaḥ
svabhāva-suddho 'ham” and visualize Paṃ and A syllables
emerging from the Void to become a lotus and moon seat.

Visualizing the self as Avalokiteśvara sitting on the moon and lotus seat
and evoking, from His Paradise, the attitude of Avalokiteśvara surroun-
ded by Bodhisattvas (attendants), one becomes one through the wisdom of
non-duality contemplation, whilst chanting the bija-mantra “Om mani padme
Hūṃ Hri”, as many times as possible. The same can be done for the con-
templation of Padmasambhava and his seed syllable mantra “Om Ā Hūṃ
vajra-guru padma-siddhi Hūṃ” and, or of other divinities at this level.
These two objectives of meditation are very often used in the traditional
Tibetan Buddha-Dharma.

The items for Incense Homa are blessed by the six mantras and their
mudrās of the Kriyā cycle or by; “Namah sarva-tathāgatebhyaḥ viśvaṃukhe-
bhyah, sarva-tat-khan utagata spharṇenam gagana-kham svāhā”, recited
seven times and by the Vajraspharnakhām, preparing, by these mystic
methods, the great and numerous offerings from the Incense fire for each
guest, according to his wishes, as, for instance, the offerings of the
Mahābodhisattvas, Samantabhadra and Avalokiteśvara.

In the same way, it bequeathes blessings upon the whole of the external
world, as the Land of Buddhas arises from the seed syllable Bhṛūm, in
meditative contemplation. It invokes all the guests at the Incense Homa,
with the mantra recitation of; Ja, Hūṃ, Vam, Ho, who take a seat, accord-
ing to precedence, and worship the set of seven offerings and others. They,
then, praise the acts of their body, speech and mind, which are splendid and
to be utterly trusted at any time.

The Mantric Ācārya wishes, in certain cases, to have the celebrant sole-
mnly praise Dgra-lha, a self-protecting deity, and also the local deities, during the Incense Homa Ceremony.

The Mantric Ācārya, by his prayers, has pleased the Buddhas and their spiritual sons, the Bodhisattvas, as well as the others, and wished that the two great kinds of Siddhis will be granted. Appeasing the haughty Dharma-pālas, he asks for protection against the internal and external spiritual obstructions. He also prays all the protective wealth-gods and goddesses to help further in the practice of the Dharma.

The he asks the local protectors, the war-gods and the goddesses for protection and assistance at all times and in all places. Usually, they will give the power of acceding to a greater Buddha-Dharma, wealth, world peace and happiness, and especially of removing any obstruction met by the Ācārya, his patrons and attendants in the granting of all their wishes.

In the same way, he will ask for good luck and blessings to be granted to the participants from the worlds of sentient beings, Nāgas and Heavens, blessings such as long life, opulence and prosperity. He, specially, will give offerings and praise the twelve guardian goddesses of the whole of the Himalayan regions, to whom Mahācārya Padmasambhava granted the task of being the protectors of the Buddha-Dharma, by receiving his benediction in his sacred Maṇḍala.

He will ask to be forgiven for the mistakes he has made in his practice of the Tantric Sādhana, whilst meditating or during Mudrās and Mantras, as well as in any ritual of Vajrayāna Buddhism, or offerings related to Incense Homa.

He recites Om Vajram, and sends back the transcendental divine guests who have blessed all sentient beings and participants. May those blessings give us forever the great Siddhis of the Diamond Vehicle and be granted again when we so request. In the same way, he sends back to their own dwelling places all the guests of this world by reciting Sarvalokagaccha.

At the end of this ceremony, the priests should share all the merits
bequeathed by this beneficial ritual of Incense Homa, which possesses transcendental virtues as well as world virtues. The same can be said for any other ritual or good deeds which share all the benefits and merits deriving from rituals and other good actions, for all sentient beings, bringing them peace and joy through the system of Buddha-Dharma.

Then, priests and participants chant rhythmically auspicious words, whilst throwing various flower petals or grains, such as barley or rice, which are the symbols of flowers.

Thereafter, they eat a small portion of the offering so as to receive the blessings of the Incense Homa Ceremony. Then, they take in their hands some of the barley-flour offering, while chanting in loud voices; Ki, Ki, So, So (Bso), Ha, Ha, Lha-rgyal-lo (May the Gods be Victorious), and tossing the flour in the air.

**Guests at the Incense Homa**

Usually, for each service, a list of guests is made, because, in the Incense Homa, offerings are presented to the four kinds of assembled guests, called Mgron-bzí in Tibetan, who can be reduced to two kinds; the transcendental, who are the honourable guests at the offering (mchod-yul) and all the sentient beings of the Universe or the spirit guests of the recipient of a gift (sbyin-yul). It is, therefore, called in this rite "’khor-'das mchod-pa", the universal offering.

This kind of ceremony is celebrated for the delight of revered guests and for the total satisfaction of all the universal guests, by means of mystic rites according to the teachings of Tantric Buddhism, which have a very powerful effect on every body in any intentional and purposeful as well as unintentional movement, because mystic power is limitless.

Mantrayāna is far superior to Sūtrayāna, for Vajrayāna includes the four meaningful analysis, which represent the most basic skills of Tantric Buddha-Dharma in the world of Vajrayāna followers. This Diamond Vehicle
The Doctorine of the Incense Homa

gives;

1. very skilled techniques

2. very kinds of techniques

3. very easy techniques

4. techniques valid for the intellect and these from the essential characteristics of the mystic doctrines of Ādi-Buddha or Vajradhara.

However, for this rite, the guests are divided into four groups;

1. The most honourable guests are the Triple Gem, Buddha <saṅs-rgyas>, Dharma <chos> and Saṅgha <dge-'dun>, along with the three Principles according to Tantric doctrines, namely; Guru <bla-ma>, Deva <yi-dam> and Dākinī <mkha’-’gro>. They represent the transcendental guests at the honourific offerings of the mystic rites. This ceremony removes all the defilements suffered by the body, speech and mind of human beings and others, and increases the two kinds of Buddhist merits by accumulation, which lead to the great perfection of the two Siddhis and to many others.

2. The learned guests are the Dharmapālas, the protectors of the Triple Gem, and their patrons. There are also the Lokapālas, the deities of the worlds and the Kṣetrapālas, the local deities of all the spiritual states. There are specially the eight kinds of spirits (aṣṭasena) devoted to Lord Buddha, and who saw Him, such as Kiṅkara <rgyal-po>, Māra <bdud>, Ratsa <btsan>, Yakṣa <bgegs>, Rākṣasa <srin-po>, Rāhula <gza’>, Nāga <klu>, Mateika <ma-mo>, who are protectors, taking different forms according to transcendental wisdom or according to their own deeds of Karma. They have a powerful effect on harm and bring benefit to all of us. Moreover, there are those whose minds are delighted by the Incense Homa or by any other offerings and who remove all mischief to assemble in order to obtain the two kinds of great Siddhis.

3. The guests of mercy are the sentient beings of the Universe, which means the six types of beings, such as the Naraka <dmyal-ba> (the hellish beings), the Preta <yi-dvags> (the hungry ghosts), the Paśu <dud’-gro>
(the animals), the Nara <mi> (human beings), the Asura <lha-min> (semi-gods) and the Deva <lha> (gods).

The recipient and the objects of mercy are satisfied by the rites and are freed from their own misfortunes, from devils and all sufferings.

4. The guests of the debts are the 360 Demons called Gdon and the 80,000 Evil Spirits called Bgegs in Tibetan. These recipients of the gifts are fully satisfied by the offerings to their own liking, performed according to mystic techniques. As a reward for those offerings, they will, following the Dharma instructions, renounce their hard heartedness and mischief towards sentient beings, those hard hearts being the result of their own misdeeds in a former existence. The past and present debts are plainly cancelled, and those of the future are prevented by the Rite's prayers.

The Purpose of Incense Homa

Generally, the Incense Homa is performed in order to remove all obstructions, calamities and their causes from both the external and the secret world of the sentient beings as well as of the patrons and participants, in the aim of creating an atmosphere of calm and serene joy. The Incense Homa has, in particular, the three important following effects:

1. A totally satisfactory offering.
2. A cleansing of all ills by the Incense.
3. A confession Ritual of evil deeds.

As it is called in Sanskrit, “Śodhana” or “Pariśodhana”, which literally means the purifying of all dust and stains in the world, or of any other evils, either personal or limitless. It is also called “Prabodhanāma”, which means that all the defilements in fact and in cause, which are cleansed from the roots, have come from previously accumulated evil Karmas. Such important effects are not only related to this Incense Homa but of course to all forms of Buddhist worship, in a more or less important way.

Still, the Incense Ritual is mainly carried out for reasons concerning the
Himalayan regions. It was constantly performed in every part of the Tibetan countryside, when the living culture of the Buddha-Dharma permeated this country. Its aim is to preserve all virtues, world peace and happiness, in order to maintain the Buddha-Dharma. It helps the followers of the holy Dharma, cures all illnesses, supports the country and the building of new homes, preserves new and old monasteries and temples, gives protection on long journeys, aids in the crossing of big rivers and in the building of new bridges.

It illuminates the Way, and gives long life; helps the nursing and raising of children; prevents the killing of animals; protects one from the harm of evil Yakṣas, enemies and Asuras; removes bad omens and dreams; aids writing, reading, listening and teaching; prevents epidemics; protects crops from frost and hail and brings rain; aids the engagement of women for marriage; aids in the plowing of fields and the construction of roofs for homes.

The Incense Ritual Text

The Ritual Text for the Incense Homa was first composed by the Mahācarya Padmasambhava in Tibet around the 8th century A.D. But he foresaw a time of later disturbance for the Buddha-Dharma and its patrons and followers. In fact, from our own experience, we know that many things which he prophesied have taken place. Several years ago, I discovered one of his prophecies in his canonical text: Ni-zla gñis-kyāṅ gyog-tu bkol, which means that in later times, people will use even the sun and the moon.

Similarly, we see many of his numerous translations in early Tantric collections, also his important teachings on initiation, based on the Tantras and given to worthy disciples. It also includes the Mahāsādhanas of the Mahāyoga. He shared many precious ways of teaching with future generations. He is, therefore, called the second Buddha by the devotees of Tibetan Buddha-Dharma, for being not only All-knowing by himself, but also by
showing Great Kindness to all sentient beings and in particular Tibetan Buddhists; facts that we know from his biographies.

Lord Padmasambhava celebrated the Incense Homa according to his method of Buddhist Ritual. He did so at the Bsam-yas Monastic University and in particular on the hill of Bsam-yas Had-po-ri for the restoration of all goodness and the elimination of disturbances during his time and future generations. It was specially for the future that he and his great disciples miraculously concealed these texts in the Six Elements, as hidden treasures, for varied lengths of time. Later, their incarnations and reincarnations rediscovered these unaltered treasures, when people needed them.

However, later on, many hundreds of such Incense Ritual texts came in the possession of each School of Tibetan Buddha-Dharma. Even in early Tantric tradition, the Rñin-ma-pa School possessed many such texts. But all the essential features of the Ritual were followed as laid down by the Padmasambhava. Among these Tibetan texts, the most popularly used by the Byan-gter tradition of Rñin-ma-pa is the hidden treasure text, discovered by Rigs-'zin rgod-dlen. The name of this text is Rgyags-brñen lha-bsaṅs, and it is still used by Tibetan Buddhists in the traditional manner. There is also a very famous text, called Sde-bgyad gser-skyems, which is used by all Tibetan Buddhist Schools. It was written, in the late 8th century, by Saṅgs-rgyas-ye-ses, a famous disciple of Lord Padmasambhava.

The meaning of “Gser-skyems” and of “Gyu-skyems” is divine food and drink, which are symbolized on plates and bowls with food by gold and turquoise ornaments, as mentioned in a Tun Huang manuscript.

Gold, silver and precious stones are set in iron file, called Rin-chén Đaru and symbolically grated over the offering bowls. Traditional celebrants still follow this practice which I heard of from my preceptor.
History of the Buddhist Incense Homa

In the 8th century, King Khri-sroñ lde-btsan, the second great King, a famous patron of Buddhism, built the Bsam-yas Monastery, which became the first Monastic University of Tibetan Buddhism. However, regional deities and the Nāgas (serpent gods) became angry, so that what was built during the day was destroyed during the night. Men would carry mountain stones to the valleys and those ones would be taken back to the mountains by local deities, called Kṣatrapālas and others.

They also harmed and brought sickness to the people, burnt crops and fruit trees, so much so that the King nearly stopped the building of the great Samye Monastery. Then, the King and his ministers held a council and decided to consult with Lord Padmasambhava, the great Mahācārya of Uḍḍiyāna. They invited the Mahāguru at Brag-dmar Bsam-yas to discuss with him and ask his blessing for the present and future times.

The Mahācārya performed a ritual and was transformed into the maṇḍala of the divine Vajrakilaya who had power over the eight kinds of phenomena, spirits and totally controlled such gods as the Nāgas, Yakṣas, Rākṣasas and many other spirits. For this purpose, he then performed the Incense Homa to thank the Triple Gem, (tri-ratna), the Gurus, Devas and Dākinis, as well as the Dharmapālas, the Lokapālas, the local deities and all the phenomenon guests.

Thus, King Khri-sroñ lde-btsan was able to complete the building of the Bsam-yas Monastic University, thanks to the blessings obtained by performing the grand Incense Homa Ceremony. Therefore, Tibetan people became happy and prosperous, the King and his Ministers achieved a long life, the six kinds of crops ripened, fruit trees flourished and all conditions improved. He, then, advised Tibetan Kings, as well as the people, to continue the practice of Incense Homa during the future generations of Tibetan Buddhists, for the benefit it would bring them.
Obtention of the Six Pāramitā through the Incense Homa

The Incense Homa possesses a great accumulation of merits, including the six pāramitā, which represent the main course towards Buddhahood.

1. The Incense Homa accomplishing both charitable and reverent offerings, satisfying all sentient beings and giving joy to all the divinities, is called Dānapāramitā.

2. The Incense Homa cleanses all moral impurities from one’s body, speech and mind, as well as those of all sentient beings. This ceremony is offered to the honourable ones; the Triple Gem and the Venerable Lamas, and other invoked guests. It makes numerous and magnificent offerings by using the holy method and the wisdom contained in the nature of Buddha.

Therefore, what follows is cleansed by these solemn techniques without hardship; the ten unwholesome deeds and the failure to follow the precepts of the Vinaya and of the Boddhisattva laws, as well as the Samaya of the Vajrayāna, the pollution of dead bodies, diseases and malicious spirits; it can diminish and abolish evil hindrances. The Incense Homa becomes akin to the Śīla or moral discipline.

3. The Incense Homa includes all the complex duties in making respectful offerings agreeable to the Triple Gem and the Gurus, which should also satisfy to the wishes of the gods, goddesses, Nāgas, Yakṣas, even though they may have formerly harmed somebody. It is therefore akin to practicing patience and endurance, called in Sanskrit, Kṣāntipāramitā.

4. The Incense Homa should often be performed with great sincerity and fervour for the delight of the divinities invoked. Then, it implies zeal, called in Sanskrit Viṃyapāramitā.

5. As all the divine guests should be invoked by the officiators, during the Incense Homa, through a visualization converging on one point only, it makes therefore use of concentration, called in Sanskrit, Dhyānapāra-
mitā.

6. Since all the divinities, beings, offerings and officiators become one and indivisible Dharma through the rites performed by the Mantric Ācārya, it can be compared to realization, called in Sanskrit, Prajñāpāramitā.

So, this ceremony allows the perfect accumulation of two kinds of merits, it also cleanses of all defilements and grants the two Siddhis.

The History of Tibetan Buddhist Banners

Tibetan banners date back to the time of the great King Srot-btsan sgam-po, one of the wives of whom was a Nepalese princess called Bal-bza’ khri-btsun, a daughter of King Amśuvarman. She was considered as an incarnation of Brkti Devī, one of the Tārā goddesses, called in Tibetan, Khro-gñer cen-ma. Her Sanskrit name and the name of the Chinese princess, as well as the names of the Tibetan Kings, are recorded in the Mañjuśrī-mūlakalpa Tantra (see Toh. No. 543), in the passage concerning prophecies. Nepalese people still call her the Brkti Mahārāṇī. She established the King’s palace on the Red Hill, in the middle of the Lha-sa Valley.

The architecture of this palace was remarkable. It was a multi-storeyed edifice, built on the model of the King Ten Neck’s fort, described in the Mahābhārata epic. The Palace was painted red and she decorated it with thousands of red banners. She did this in order to gain the favour of her regal husband. Later on, during the 17th century, the Red Palace was extensively renovated by the Fifth Dalai Lama and his Chief Administrator, Sans-rgyas gya-mtsho.

Historically, the Red Palace was very important, since it became the Dalai Lama’s residence, and was popularly referred to as the Potala, which means the mountain residence of Avalokiteśvara (spyan-ras gzig). This edifice was principally used for Tibetan religious activities, and also served as an educational center for novice monks, under the name of the Phen-bde legs-bṣad gliṅ Monastery. There, they would practice, according to ancient
traditions, several Tantras of the four or six classes and their ritualistic Sādhanas, such as the Kālacakra and Vajrakumāra of the Mahāyoga Tantra of the Anuttara class.

Moreover, this palace contained great Tibetan treasures, including numerous original Sanskrit manuscripts, along with their Tibetan translations, written on various metals, such as gold, silver or precious stones, as well as countless precious gems, and priceless holy objects, such as images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and a great number of other things collected through many generations of the Tibetan people over more than two thousand years. Since the Fifth Dalai Lama, it had been used as the residence of the Dalai Lama and his dignitaries, until 1959, the date when the Fourteenth Dalai Lama went into exile in India. The Dalai Lama now resides at Dharmasāla, in Himachal State, in Northern India.

The Tradition of Tibetan Prayer Banners

Traditionally, prayer banners are mainly hoisted in the Tibetan Buddhist world during the Incense Ceremonies. This practice has been followed without interruption until the present in free countries. This tradition derives from early Tibetan Buddhism. Although these prayer banners do not represent the Tibetan National Emblem, many Himalayan countries still faithfully preserve this custom. Their prayer banners are the concrete symbol of their free faith in Tibetan Buddha-Dharma to be seen by the rest of the world.

Tibetan Buddhists are very fond of the Incense Homa ceremony, accompanied with prayer banners. Sometimes, people choose their own “age” colour, indicating the five Elements of the Tibetan calendar system. For instance, we find the various coloured prayer banners and a great number of green banners in India wherever there are Tibetan communities. This is because His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama was born in 1935, the year of the wild boar, and wood is symbolized by the colour green. People offer
Incense and prayer banners for His long life and the realization of His wishes, because the people love and respect Him so much.

Prayer banners are made with materials of five different colours, which represent the five Elements: wood(green), fire(red), earth(yellow), metal(white) and water(blue). The shape of the prayer banners is usually square, rectangular or triangular; the size varying according to tradition and personal wishes. Almost all prayer banners are hoisted in two ways; tall vertical strips and horizontal strings, on which are printed various Dharanis (magic spells) and other prayers.

Usually, prayer banners are hung on stupas, as for example on the Stūpa of the Eyes in Kathmandu, Nepal. In the same manner, they are placed on the crests of mountains, at hill passes, at river crossings, temples and monasteries, retreats, shrines of regional or local protective deities. They can also be tied from one tree to the other. Prayer banners are called “Dar-leog or Jo-dar” in Tibetan, which means the Victorious Banners of the Righteous People, warding off evil influences and opening the way to glorious prosperity.

Basic Principles of the Dhāraṇic Bannners

Buddha-Dharma is the sum of Buddha’s teachings. He, by himself, achieved ultimate enlightenment, for the benefit of all sentient beings, and long before His numerous deeds were accomplished in this world, called “Jambudvīpa” in Sanskrit. His sacred Sermons are the greatest of His twelve eminent Acts. Buddha’s Sermons are classified into three or four sections; Vinayas, Sūtras, Abhidharma and Vidyādharapiṭakas, which can also be divided into Sūtras and Tantras.

But, the fourfold classification is not as well known as the Tripitakas among scholars. This is because the Catuhpiṭaka is mainly concerned with the Tantras which pertain to the fourth section and which especially contain early Tibetan translations of the authentic teachings. Hence, this title is not
known among Buddhists who do not practice the Tantras. Buddha-Dharma
tells no lies and never leads us to misery. We, therefore, as Buddhists, are
exceedingly fortunate to be able to sincerely follow and remain totally
faithful to the Buddha-Dharma.

The banner materials are generally inscribed with many kinds of
prayers such as Dhāraṇīs, mantric formulas and personal wishes, which are
stamped on them with wood-blocks or by other methods. Such prayers have a
powerful effect on all sentient beings and those who are faithfully dedicated
to them. Dhāraṇīs and other Buddhist prayers are excerpts from the Tripi-
taka, the Catuḥpīṭaka or the Vajradhara (sermons) of Lord Buddha, or from
writings composed by His followers, such as Arahats, Vidyādharas and
Siddhas.

The most popular inscription on prayer banners is the Dhāraṇī of
the goddess Dhvajāgrakeyūra <rgyal-mtshan rtse-mo'i dpuṅ-rgyan> as
indicated in the following passage from the Kanjur: “Trayaśitraśa or Tuṣita
(Heavens), where Lord Buddha dwelt for some time with Kuṣika Indra and
His battalions, was at war with Asura (region below Heavens). They lost to
Asura’s troopd. Indra went to ask Lord Buddha what should be done to
gain victory over Asura. Lord Buddha expounded this sacred method with
the following instructions:

“When I was a Bodhisattva, I was instructed by Ārya-dhvajā-
grakeyūra-nāma-dhāraṇī <'phags-pa rgyal-mtshan rtse -mo'i dpuṅ-
rgyan Žes bya-ba'i gzunṣ>, the goddess worshipped by Buddha-Aparāji-
ta-dvaja and I followed Her teachings. If you keep this Dhāraṇī in mind
and raise the banners of this Prayer, you shall be victorious.”

They, then, followed the instructions of Buddha and were immediately
victorious against Asura’s troops, who were antecedent to the actual gods.
Therefore, all the gods started to worship the goddess Dhāraṇī (gzunṣ-snags
kyi lha-mo). This is belong to Tathāgata-gotra of Kriyā Tantra. (see Toh.
No. 923)
Supplement to the Incense Homa

Historically, the Incense Homa Ceremony, according to the Buddhist form, started in Tibet during the reign of Khri-sron Ide-btsan. Since then, it has often been performed, following Buddhist ritual and has been continuously preserved by Tibetans and still now by Tibetan Buddhists living outside Tibet. No matter from which part of Tibet they came, nor their religious denomination, all loved this ceremony. Moreover, this tradition has not become mere history but remains alive wherever Tibetan Buddhist people are found.

There are many kinds of Incense (lha-bsaṅs) Ceremonies. The large “Rgyags-brñan Lha-bsaṅs” is performed every month in most monasteries and secular houses. The largest Incense festival takes place once every year in June and is called “Zam-lgiṅ spyi-bsaṅs” in Tibetan (incense offerings for the universal protectors), according to the Lha-sa tradition. Religious persons perform it every morning, at the daily hearth of Incense offerings (bsaṅs-khuṅ). The Mnol-bsaṅs is performed in the evening, its purpose is to free from all kinds of disease and evils. There are many other Incense Ceremonies, each with a specific purpose.

There are four kinds of Bodhisattva alms in Mahāyāna Buddhism; the gift of goods, moral and spiritual instruction, protection, affection, love and so on. Therefore, this Ceremony is deeply connected with this aspect, for it includes offerings to the transcendental guests as well as material and spiritual gifts to the guests to this world. This ancient form of culture has been the social nourishment of Tibetans. People believed that their happiness rested on these Rites at the time when true culture was alive in Tibet.

When I used to live near the Lha-sa Valley, I often went, since the age of seven, in pilgrimage to Lha-sa, and so I did until I had to flee to India, in 1959. The great images of Śakyamuni impressed me so strongly that I can still vividly remember them, and see the great Temples of the Lha-sa
Valley, always full, the whole year round, of pilgrims and worshippers. Many people performed Incense Ceremonies and hoisted prayer banners on the arched roof of the Rasa ’Khrul-snañ Temple, in front of the goddess Ma-gcig dpal-lha, Mahâkâlî or Ekajaṭī, and each morning, in front of the main gate of the Rasa Ra-mo-che Temple.

I was trained under spiritual guidance, from my childhood, to lead a scholarly spiritual life. I had especially as a preceptress, the very kind Rje-btsun Lo-chen of the Šug-gseb Nunnery, which is near Lha-sa, behind the ruins of the Zul-phu Monastery, the former abode of the early Tibetan Vinayans. Rahor Chos-grags, one of the great scholar saints of our times, whom we called Lama Rim-po-che, was also one of my preceptors. His daily life was in complete harmony with the precepts of the ancient Mahâthera, and he was also a great disciple of the Mahopadhyâya Mkhen-chen Gžen-dga’, who was the remarkable composer of the thirteen important series of the great Indian Śāstras on the Tripitaka and the Mâyâjâla Tantra of the Mahâyoga Class, including commentaries, called Gzun-chen Ka-pod bcu-gsum.

So, for the many years I lived close to my spiritual guides, I saw and learnt from them the daily morning practice of the Incense offering, that they would perform apart from their main practices, such as daily contemplation and teaching on many subjects to Dharmic pupils. Lama Rim-po-che also made many prayer banners inscribed with Mantras, Vidyâmantras, Dhâranîs and many other prayers. He would use his hair, mixed with animal hair, to plait strings for prayer banners and he loved to make prayer-wheels of the Mañi Mañḍala, carved with the seed syllable of Avalokiteśvara, God of Mercy. In this way, they devoted, with serene joy, their whole life to the Dharma, for the happiness of all sentient beings.
1) See Lho-brag chos-'byun by Dpa'-bo gtsug-lag phren-ba, Lokesh Candra reproduction from Central Tib. edition.

2) See Rgyal-brnan and Ža Padma dhan-chen mi-'gyur lhun-gyis grub-pa'i Phud-rabs 'phags-pa kun-tu bzañ-po'i mechod-pa'i dga'-ston by Rgyal-ba Kloñ-chen rabs-'byams’s Miscellaneous Writings, 2nd Vol., A'-dzom-sgar edition.


5) See King Sron-btsan sgam-po’s Chronicle, written by the Fifth Dalai Lama “Rdsogs-ldan gžon-nu’i dga’ ston”.

—— 89 ——