

Rite as *theosis* in Indo-Tibetan *vajrayana*¹

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“ For the sake of all mother sentient beings
I transform myself into a *guru-yidam* ”
(I PANCHEN LAMA, *Guru Puja*)

“ *Noli fora ire, in te ipsum redi,
in interiore homini habitat veritas* ”
(AUGUSTINUS, *De Vera Religione*)

Tibetan sacred arts can be conceived as the perceptible remainders, the concrete remains, of ‘divinization’—Latin: *divinificatio*; Greek: *theosis*—, the fostering of the process of familiarity with the ‘archetypal divinities’ (*ishthadevata*; *Yid Dam* or, with some differences, ‘*Dod lHa*) being realized by the attempts to engrave into the formal image a vigorous valency, evoked by a meditating mind in order to prompt it again to another meditating mind for the divinization of both. The most important function of this art reveals itself to be that of fostering the process of familiarity of the mind through the phases of meditation on a specific *numen* that can be expressed in evident anthropomorphic representation as well as through symbolical implements, geometrical specimens or syllables. The analysis of the link existing between form and mind is not only the first step towards every gnoseological definition of reality as an ontological unity, but rather the possibility of this analysis in itself indicates that when human beings produce ‘works of art’ they are substantially shaping the subtle matter forming the plane sustaining the universal field of interaction.

¹ This paper was delivered as a lecture by the author in Leiden, The Netherlands, for the Ninth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS) on June 26th 2000, and in some parts published as “Theosis in Indo-Tibetan vajrayana – Considerations on The Use of Theological Lemmas in the Tantric Lore”, in *Prajna Vihara – the Journal of Philosophy and Religion*, Bangkok 2001, pp. 115-123.

Tibetan sacred art, through whatever physical medium it is expressed, refers back to a main determining reason. The thangkhas, mural paintings, sculptures, illuminations and many specific elements of the architecture are conceived in order to be utilized as perceptible supports for a practice informed—in relation with the body-mind compound—by a non-dual spiritual attitude.

In the Indo-Tibetan *vajrayana* the various psychic essences constitute indeed a sort of synopsis between the physiological and visible part of the person and the intellectual, invisible one. These essences are described, according to different functional valences, as *kala*, *rasa* and *bindu*. But also the fluids and the tissues, like blood, are not only simple objects to be mentally analysed, but sacramental substances indeed. The concept of the transformation of blood in ‘nectar of immortality’ (*amrta*; in Greek: *ambrotos*) draws its symbolical validity from the process of transmutation of a man into a divinity.

This conscious transformation will lead to the divinization of the practitioner or *sadhaka*. The metanoia of the ordinary human being in a blissful and omniscient divinity stands as an hardly condivisible option by the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic theologies. Also if some particular reflections inside these ‘positive revelations’ seem to point towards the divinization of creatures—*diis estis*, ‘you’ll be gods’, in the Old Testament—they remain nevertheless mainly marginal by referring to the most orthodox connotation.

What the term *theosis*—literally, the condition or the state of deity; also, the ‘deification’ of man—is here to be meant? Let us ponder the current use of Christian Latin terms like ‘meditation’ (*meditatio*) or ‘monk’ (*monachus*, from the Greek *monos*, ‘solitary’) for partially describe the not-so equivalent lemmas (*dhyana*, *bhikshu*) utilized in the ideological frame of the *buddhadharma*. The clarification of the term *theosis* is actually needed and pivotal in order to the right utilization of it in the context we’re approaching to.

The doctrine of man’s ability to attain godhood appears in several places in the New Testament. Moreover, this teaching—known as *theosis*, deification or divinization—is literally plastered throughout the writings of the early Church fathers.

In discussing man’s potential, Clement of Alexandria used the verb *theopeos*, which means ‘to be made divine’, literally ‘to make god’. Indeed, Clement of Alexandria’s salvation theology has been described as a ‘theology of deification’.

Among the early Church fathers there was a vigorous soteriological tradition which taught that the destiny of man was to become like god, and even to become deified. Later theologians felt the need to

try to soften the early Church's divinization theology. Some post-Nicene fathers continued to use deification language but altered its original meaning while working out 'three-in-oneist' formulations. Extreme limitations and qualifications began to be placed on the doctrine of *theosis*. As time went on, deification came to be defined by many as merely achieving some sort of mystical union with god. While god's inner essence was intended forever beyond our comprehension, his energies, grace, life and power were interpreted to fill the whole universe. When Christians speak of the divine energies, they do not mean by this an 'emanation' from god, an intermediary between god and man, or a thing or gift that god bestows. On the contrary, the energies are god himself in his activity and self-manifestation. When a man knows or participates in the divine energies, he knows or participates in god, so far as this is possible for a created being. Christians are able to affirm the possibility of a direct or mystical union between man and god, what the Greek fathers term the *theosis* of man, his deification. There is union, but not fusion or confusion. Although oned with the divine, man still remains man; he is not swallowed up or annihilated, but between him and god there continues to exist a relationship of person to person.

Therefore, the position of Christian theology is that we participate in the energies of god, which he 'sends' to mankind, but never in the essence of god. The essence is unknowable and reserved for god himself.

Thomas Aquinas described this process like a poker being held in a fire. The poker becomes a fire, in that it takes every attribute of the fire. It burns, radiates heat and light, emits energy as it is transformed by the fire's energy. And yet, it though it has 'become fire', it is unquestionably iron as well.

Actually, our human nature has the propension to be completely immersed in this divine fire, in the whirling dance of the eternal interpenetration with the Eternal².

Now, we must not confuse this ancient Orthodox Christian belief with Pantheism which claims that human beings are essentially

² For a glimpse of what it's here to be meant, refer to the following lines from a 'mother' *tantra*: *Nang Gi Phag Mos gZung 'Dzin 'Khri Shing bCom/ mChog Gi DH'u Tir Zhugs Pa'i Gar mKhan Ma/ Tshangs Pa'i sGo Nas sPrin Lam dByings Su Thon/ Khrag 'Thung dPa' Bor 'Khyud Cing Rol Bar Shog//* "When the inner Varahi has destroyed the creeping vine of my preconceptions about grasping consciousness and the object it grasps, and the dancing lady residing in my supreme central channel emerges from my aperture of Brahma into the sphere of the pathway of clouds, may I embrace and sport with the Vira-hero drinker of Blood." (see: G.N.DHARGYEY, 1992, p.68.)

divine. Christianity does not teach that we are ‘part’ of god; we are creatures through and through. Human nature and Divine Nature are infinitely different, not one and the same. So *theosis*, in this conceptual frame, is not an identification of creatures with god.

Since divinity and humanity are infinitely different, the latter cannot evolve into the former either. So *theosis* has nothing in common with the belief that men can achieve godship. Limited creatures cannot, according to this ideological frame, be transformed into Uncreated, Infinite Divinity.

It’s actually only in the very recent times that the Roman Catholic Church has choose to reconsider the value of esicast (from *esike*, ‘tranquillity’) prayer—also called ‘heart prayer’—, that is the repetition of short sentences tuned on the breath and/or the palpitation; still few years ago this way of contemplation, so venerated along the centuries in the Orthodox Churches, was interpreted by the Latin Church as an irenistic aid leading towards mere quietism³.

One of the intention of this paper is to advance the hypothesis that some fundamental ideas regarding, in different cultural environments, the transformation of something—a food, a metal—in something else, draw their symbolical meaning from the process of transmutation of a man into a divinity, the *theosis*. In the Buddhist Indo-Tibetan tradition, the *mahayana-vajrayana* spiritual lineages preserve till our days some systems—called *tantra*—promising

³ Quietism (*quies/quietus*, ‘passivity’) in the broadest sense is the doctrine which declares that man’s highest perfection consists in a sort of psychical self-annihilation and a consequent absorption of the soul into the Divine Essence even during the present life. In its essential features Quietism, considered by Christians, is a characteristic of the religions of India. Both Brahmanism and Buddhism are perceived as a sort of self-annihilation, a state of indifference in which the soul enjoys an imperturbable tranquillity. And the means of bringing this about is the recognition of one’s identity with Brahma, the all-god, or, for the Buddhist, the quenching of desire and the consequent attainment of *nirvana*, incompletely in the present life, but completely after death. Among the Greeks the quietistic tendency is represented by the Stoics. Along with Pantheism, which characterizes their theory of the world, they present in their *apatheia* an ideal which recalls the indifference aimed at by the Oriental mystics. The wise man is he who has become independent and free from all desire. According to some of the Stoics, the sage may indulge in the lowest kind of sensuality, so far as the body is concerned, without incurring the least defilement of his soul. The Neoplatonists held that the One gives rise to the *nous* or Intellect, this to the world-soul, and this again to individual souls. These, in consequence of their union with matter, have forgotten their divine origin. Hence the fundamental principle of morality is the return of the soul to its source. The supreme destiny of man and his highest happiness consists in rising to the contemplation of the One, not by thought but by ‘ecstasy’ (*ekstasis*).

shortcuts towards Liberation, or Enlightenment, with an altruistic aim. In some rites related to those systems, the performers, in order to assure the correct execution of the rite itself, are requested to ‘divinize’ themselves just from the beginning of the liturgy⁴.

The ritual transformation of the time and space context is widely used in Indo-Tibetan *vajrayana*, the structure of which thought hinges both on ‘sympathetic compassion’ (*karuna*) and on ‘intuitive understanding’ (*prajña*) of the ultimate mode of existing (*wunyata*). These co-efficient causes of wisdom enable the adept to make full use of the workings of the liberated mind, so as to be able to overcome the cycle of unconscious re-births and become an ‘awaked one’, a *buddha* released from any conditioning, free from failing to identify himself with the unmeasurable order of consciousness, and thus finally able to effectively do the good—the ‘real’ good—of all transmigrating beings. It is always useful to interpret the psycho-experimental systems which reached Tibet from India in light of the dual focus of sympathetic compassion and vision of the truth, in considering the effect of tantric systems both on metaphysics and on morality.

The human body in this context is considered akin to the chrysalis from which one day the ‘angelic butterfly’ will be released. This is certainly not a marginal idea within the culture it has occurred in over the course of time, but rather an instrumental notion, a thirst for improvement to be made use of on the path of transformation which man travels over time in order to attain the full achievement of his natural potential. In the *mahayana-vajrayana* conceptual frame, this can be done by actualising the so called ‘divine pride’ (*deva-mana*), in the ‘periodic training of remembering the divinity’ (*deva-anusjrti-anupurva-prayoga*) admitted by the ‘formal practice’ (*sadhana*) of the esoteric ‘resultant vehicle’ (*phalayana*) opposed to the exoteric ‘causal vehicle’ (*hetuyana*).

⁴ “Within Great Bliss I manifest as a Guru-Yidam, from my clear body, profusions of light-rays radiate forth to the ten directions, blessing the environment and the beings therein. All becomes most perfectly arrayed with only excellent qualities infinitely pure.” “For the sake of all mother sentient beings I transform myself into a Guru-Yidam and thus shall I lead all sentient beings to a Guru-Yidam’s Supreme Enlightenment.” “[...] In the grand play of pristine awareness, all places are vajra-fields and all structures majestic vajra-palaces [...]” “All objects are imbued with the glories of all wishes. All beings are actually Viras and Virinis, there is not even the word ‘impurity’ or ‘flaw’: all is but infinitely pure.” (LOBZANG CHOKYI GYALTSEN, I Panchen Lama, *The Guru Puja – bLa Ma mChod Pa*, Dharamsala 1979, I, IV; LVI-LVII.)

T Tibetans see their spiritual masters as divinities—it's typical of Tibetan Buddhism that the *bLa.Ma* is the 'superior', even to all the deities—but this position could be referred to the administrative and sacerdotal structure of the Empire of Rome. Together with C.LÉVI-STRAUSS⁵, let us consider the real effectiveness of the ritual—interlaced with the ancient topic of the identity of the body of the *rex* with the territory of the State—that officially would had to decree the *apotheosis* of Augustus Octavian. The critical suspension, supposed by the great anthropologist, of Octavian and its interlocutors regarding the effectiveness of the decree of the iniziatic college that would have declared him a 'god', finds direct echoes with the concept of *theosis*. Octavian would effectively become a god, after the 'bureaucratic' ratification of his own *apotheosis*, or is he to continue to live and to feel like whichever other mortal? All this considerations, stimulated by the reading of LÉVI-STRAUSS' work, offer the ground to interesting questions. Octavian, the man, could become a god? If that did not happen, was for one substantial-ontological impossibility, or because the kind of the rite was in itself not suitable for this purpose?

The Oriental world is the holder of a culture very different from the European based West⁶. And it is but natural that one would assume—and for many people this assumption appears to be correct—that the patterns worked out within one's own tradition would be if not easier to follow, at least more understandable and meaningful than those worked out by a totally alien tradition and based on premises that are obscure and mysterious to the Western mentality. The reason behind such an appeal, even in spite of this handicap which sometimes can also be serious, is, in my opinion, the fact that these spiritualities speak directly to the individuals and engage them in a personal quest, while Christianity, though also stressing on the necessity of a personal relationship of the individual soul with his creator, soon tended to subordinate it again to the overcompassing influence of the 'community' (*ekklesia*), which is the visible aspect of the Church. But one should not forget that, after all, even Christianity, at its beginning, was but one among those many spiritualities flooding into Rome—at that time the metropoly of an unified West—from the same direction: *ex oriente lux*. In a certain

⁵ *Tristes Tropiques*, Paris 1968 (1955), pp. 108-110.

⁶ For the Far Eastern conception of the State, just think about the importance of the service of the Country in Japan: " Anche lo Shinto di Stato ha un suo pantheon: ma questo pantheon non è un empireo di dei supremi cui fanno cerchio cori di santi, bensì un esercito di eroi i cui nomi sono incisi in quel vivente registro che è la memoria dei vivi. " (G.TUCCI, *Asia Religiosa*, Roma 1946, p. 279).

sense, then, one has to admit that such an attraction is not new to the Western civilization. Nevertheless, the strength of Western Hellenistic-Roman culture eventually succeeded in interweaving Christianity with his own spirit, bending its Oriental characteristics into a well knitted Western mentality. And this, together with its early necessity of uniting its members in a strong community life, with passing of time has brought along a tendency to give to such a community an absolute power, bent to suffocate the individuals and their singularities. Of course, the diversity of the path chosen pushes the modern Western seekers to regroup themselves into small communities, but the spirit behind such groups is somewhat of a different kind. Even if people cluster together around the same master, each individual is engaged in fighting his own personal battle, because, after all, inner transformation and enlightenment are always a personal achievement.

Translations are now available for numerous ritual handbooks, both for the so-called ‘preliminary practices’ and for the tantric practices *per se*, which would involve identification with the archetypal divinities and so forth.

Since these rites do not necessarily require the practitioner to renounce lay status, it may be expected that *vajrayana* Buddhism will continue to expand in the West in the foreseeable future, along the lines already established during the past years of implantation.

How is it possible that a ritualistic tradition, institutionalized in the form of initiatic assemblies peculiar to the social structure of a civilization on the ‘roof of the world’, hope to survive intact in the opulent and unsatisfied West? In this initial phase of the transmission of *vajrayana* to the great cities of the modern world, inevitably there will be errors of perception and reception; given the disparity between the Indo-Tibetan culture of origin and the civilization of implantation. Much depend on the ‘motivations’—*respice finem*—of those Westerners who are bringing to *vajrayana* Buddhism their own typical questions.

How structures peculiar to the great *vajrayana* colleges will adapt themselves so as to take root in the social climate of the metropolis without denaturing themselves entails developments which at present are very difficult to foresee. What I would like to propose for our consideration in this context is the extent to which our modern urban realities are actually waiting to be blessed, and transformed, by the common efforts of human beings who are engaged in what is, in effect, a priestly ministry of themselves.

I would hope that all this considerations might help us all come to a deeper understanding of this great theme and attempt to show its

implications and interconnections with the mysteries of being, of consciousness and of suffering. I would imagine we could all be enriched by a sharing of the spiritual riches of each Tradition, a spiritual symbol being an object pointing toward our inner subject, our inner being. As the physical universe is made by matter, in the same way the mind is built up by symbols, and the significance and power of the symbols are awakened in accordance with our own understanding of their deep significance⁷.

Let me conclude with an amplification from Teresa de Avila: “Buddha (Christ) has no hands but yours”. It is at least an amazing thought to ponder: live in a society of possible gods and goddesses where the dullest and most uninteresting person may one day become a person which you would be strongly tempted to worship! According to some traditions, we are not human beings having a spiritual experiences, we are indeed spiritual beings having a human experience.

Without any doubt, it should be profitable for us in using terms like *theosis* for understand the description of some inner processes made by the *vajrayana* schools, but only when we have made clear that these terms are rooting in traditions formally, historically and theoretically, external to the esoterical aspect of *buddhadharma*, a lore in which the ontological gap between a god-creator and the creatures simply doesn't exist.

“ *Fortis imaginatio generat casum* ”
(MONTAIGNE, *Essay I*)

⁷ “ Often the symbols of different religions may have more in common than have the abstractly formulated official doctrines [...] The true symbol does not merely point to something else. It contains in itself a structure which awakens our consciousness to a new awareness of the inner meaning of life and of reality itself. A true symbol takes us to the center of the circle, not to another point on the circumference. It is by symbolism that man enters effectively and consciously into contact with his own deepest self, with other people, and with God. ” (T.MERTON, “Symbolism: Communication or Communion”, in *Love and living*, New York 1979, p. 79).

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ABSTRACT

One of the intention of this paper is to advance the hypothesis that some fundamental ideas regarding, in different cultural environments, the transformation of something—a food, a metal—in something else, draw their symbolical meaning from the process of transmutation of a man into a divinity (*theosis*). It should be profitable for us in using terms like *theosis* for understand the description of some inner processes made by the *vajrayana* schools, but only when we have made clear that these terms are rooting in traditions formally, historically and theoretically, external to the esoteric aspect of *buddhadharma*, a lore in which the ontological gap between a god-creator and the creatures simply doesn't exist. In the Buddhist Indo-Tibetan tradition, the *mahayana-vajrayana* lineages preserve till our days some systems (*tantra*) promising shortcuts towards Liberation, or Enlightenment, with an altruistic aim. In some rites related to those systems, the performers, in order to assure the correct execution of the rite itself, are requested to 'divinize' themselves just from the beginning of the liturgy. This can be done by actualising the so called 'divine pride' (*deva-mana*), in the 'periodic training of remembering the divinity' (*deva-anusmrti-anupurva-prayoga*) admitted by the 'formal practice' (*sadhana*) of the esoteric 'resultant vehicle' (*phalayana*) opposed to the exoteric 'causal vehicle' (*hetuyana*). Tibetan sacred arts can be conceived indeed as the perceptible remainders, the concrete remains, of *theosis*; the fostering of the process of familiarity with the archetypal divinities (*ishtadevata*) being realized by the attempts to engrave into the formal image a vigorous valency, evoked by a meditating mind in order to prompt it again to another meditating mind for the divinization of both.

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