

**FOLKLORES IN BUDDHIST FOLKTALES AND  
INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES: AN ANALYSIS OF  
DOCUMENTATION OF FAITH**

**Tenzin Nyima Bhutia**

Research Scholar

Department of Comparative Literature

Jadavpur University

Kolkata - 700032

West Bengal, India

Folklores are traditions passed down from generation to generation. It carries with it not only stories and songs but also the memory, culture and history of a group of people. Folk refers to people and lore means traditional knowledge or belief. Since humanity's creation on earth, mankind has fought to comprehend, interpret, and principally categorize themselves as well as the events, circumstances, and existences around them. He formed an alliance of beliefs in accordance with the period and environmental conditions he encountered. He constructed beliefs in response to incomprehensible circumstances, events, incidents, and beings with faith. Religion and folklores have overlapping elements even though differing in scopes. Both phrases refer to conceptual frameworks that are extremely significant to a particular group and make claims about the supernatural or sacred. In general, folklore is seen as a part or facet of religion.

In the 20th century, Buddhism significantly influenced the spiritual, cultural, and social life of both Asia and the West. Between the late 6th and the early 4th century BCE, during a time of significant social change and intense religious activity, Buddhism developed in the north-eastern region of India. At that time, there was a great deal of discontent with Brahman sacrifices and rituals originating from the time's Caste System, and ascetics in northwest India were developing a more individualised and spiritual religious experience than the ones found in the Vedas. This was a time of uncertainty, unrest, and experimentation in the region due to the disintegration of

tribal cohesiveness and the growth of petty kingdoms. Buddhism swept in and took off like wildfire for two basic reasons. The absence of a caste system in Buddhism is the first explanation. It was fair to everyone including teachings about humility, anti-discrimination, and compassion for other living things. Second, unlike the Vedas, which were primarily comprehended by Brahmans, the Pali language that the Buddha and his disciples used to preach was accessible to all laypeople. Buddha insisted on employing languages that could reach a broader portion of the public despite advice from his devoted pupils.

Buddhism has a far more extensive body of discourse. It can be traced back to antiquity, and several deductive interpretations of these teachings have been made over time. As a result, there are now various schools of Buddhism, however they maintain its fundamental principles despite the diversity of schools and sects. These ideas were reinterpreted, rethought, and reformed as a result. The *Pali Tripitaka* is one of the most important works of literature.<sup>1</sup> These recorded texts not only contain mantras but also stories narrated by the Buddha about his past lives. These tales were used as teaching aid by the Buddha and his disciples.

Buddhist doctrine holds that following the Dharma and carrying out its rules will lead to happiness, fulfilment, and salvation while disobeying or violating it will result in unending suffering in the cycle of reincarnation. Buddhism places a lot of emphasis on morality, and it is thought that taking good intentions and acting on them will help break the cycle of rebirth and get one closer to nirvana. According to the principle of dependent origination, nothing exists independently or by itself; instead, everything is the consequence of numerous interrelated factors. It also implies that "nothing exists separately, by itself," and that everything that arises is "depending upon conditions"

---

<sup>1</sup> The Pali Tripitaka consists of Abhidhamma Pitaka which contains doctrinal systematizations and summaries, Vinaya Pitaka which contains the rules governing the monastic order and Sutta Pitaka of discourse containing the Buddha's sermons.

As a result, understanding these conditions is crucial in order to remove dukkha. This concept of dependent origination is connected to the cycle of life that sustains all creatures. As a "constant circle of sorrow," it is understood. This is what Buddhism refers to as the "wheel of becoming," also known as the "twelfefold collection of conditions" and thought to be the twelve connections of dependent origination that account for the emergence of dukkha. Buddhist folktales revolve around intentions to help a person differentiate between moral and immoral.

*Once upon a time, a man was walking on the road by which there was a Buddha statue made of mud. Worried that the rain might ruin the statue, he placed a worn-out shoe nearby on top of it to shelter it from the rain. After that, another man passing by saw the dirty shoes on the Buddha's statue. He immediately brushed it off and called the man who placed the old shoe a sinner. What according to you was the right thing to do?*

Acharya Palden Phuntsok, from Tibet, a *lama* of the Sakya Tsechen Trinley Dargye Ling Monastery, counter questioned my queries regarding what is moral and what is not according to Buddhism.<sup>2</sup>

Everyday rituals such as offering seven bowls of water or *yonchhap* on the altar every morning is a chore for any lay Buddhist who performs the duty without any question while few refuses to because they do not know why it needs to be done.<sup>3</sup> Similarly pictures of *Sipa Khorlo* or the paintins of *Mthunpa spun bzi* are misinterpreted

---

<sup>2</sup> Lama refers to a monk.

<sup>3</sup> Yonchhap literally translates to yon= glittering and chhap= water.

as charms to ward off evil and hung on doors at Buddhist households.<sup>4</sup> Even when we see a sculpture of the Buddha, one must look for the distinctive qualities of the Buddha that are historically thought to have *mahapuruṣalakṣaṇa* in Buddha paintings and sculptures.<sup>5</sup> The 32 traits are listed and explained in the Digha Nikaya and the Brahmayu Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya, both of which are found in the "Discourse of the Marks." Even though the Dona sutta mentions seeing one of the markings in the footprint, the wheel mark itself is not included in comparison analyses. According to Acharya Lakpa Bomzon:

*The ears in a Buddha's statue are elongated; this is one of the 32 characteristics.*

*The earlobes need to touch the shoulders. Buddha's head isn't bald, it is spiral-spiral, his hair curls towards the right just like we go around a monastery circles.*

Since early statues and icons of the Buddha did not have these features, it has been proposed by Bhikkhu Analayo that some may have formed from the sculptor, particularly the webbed fingers, another one of the 32 characteristics which would protect the delicate fingers of the statues from damage. He added-

---

<sup>4</sup> Sipa Khorlo means the Wheel of Life. Mthunpa spundzi is the depiction of four animals an elephant, a monkey, a rabbit and a bird which are the characters of the tale Four Harmonious Animals believed to be the story of one of Buddha's past lives.

<sup>5</sup> Mahapuruṣalakṣaṇa in Sanskrit means the Thirty-two Characteristics of a Great Man. These were said to be the physical features of either a Great King (chakravartin) or a Bodhisattva, because of which the prediction was made on the fate of Siddhartha Gautama.

*It is called the Buddha's tsuktor on his head, one of the characteristics. Nobody can see the top of Buddha's head. One of Buddha's disciples tried to see it. He climbed up to the heaven of Gyaltzenriksi and looked at Buddha. His head was above where the disciple had reached. He then climbed up to the heaven of Sumchu Shasum, his head was higher than that place too. Above that Thapdol, higher than that too. While doing so, he reached and looked from the topmost part of the universe made up of three elements, called hogmin. He saw Buddha (Buddha's head) even higher. The reason was that, while Buddha was a disciple and lived five hundred years of Bodhisattva (referring to his previous lives), he always bowed his head low and prostrated in front of those he had to respect. The fruit of which in this life, nobody can see his head.*

These are the satyayug tales of the Buddha, Acharya added. Nowadays, we can simply see the tsuktor on the head of a Buddha's statue, however, the story held a different moral. This could either be interpreted as Buddha being the highest or as a moral narrative to teach the disciples of humility.

There is a tradition of hanging horizontally as well as vertical prayer flags known as 'lungdar'. These are known to keep away evil spirits from it is placed. It is usually placed in the yards, in front or behind houses, sometimes on terraces, stuck to bamboo or stitched to a thread. Lakpa Meme says-

*Prayers are printed according to God. Hung. Ramney brings it to life.<sup>6</sup> When the flags flap on the wind blowing, the prayers direct the spirits in Bardo on the correct path, the spirits will be at peace. It resists evil spells, and deflects evil eye. The most valuable lungdar is GyaltshenTsemo, of which a story exists even in Domang.<sup>7</sup> The demons won over the Gods. Indra dev goes to Buddha and asks " they have reached our borders, what should we do?" "While I was out begging for alms, a Bodhisattva taught me this spell. I will give it to you. Trace it on a piece of cloth and set it up on the border. The demons will not be able to enter your area". From this day onwards, no demon ever crossed over to God's area.*

Folklore is the only way to connect this world of curiosity and anxiety to divinity. In a world where people are constantly trying to make sense of everything around them, non- scientific regions of research areas are kept sane and safeguarded by narratives.

Khenpo Sonam Gyatso, a resource person who is a monk at Zang Dhok Palri Monastery in Kalimpong narrates a folk tale to specify the importance of faith in following religion-

*Once upon a time there was a mother who was completely devoted in the worship of Buddha who would order a tooth of the Buddha for her altar to her businessman son who often frequented to Lhasa. The son always forgot to bring*

---

<sup>6</sup> Ramney is a spell used by learned monks to bring auspicious texts, statues or prayer flags to life.

<sup>7</sup> Domang is one of the pechas that contains narrations.

one until she threatened him to jump off a cliff herself if he forgot to bring her the tooth again. The son gave her a tooth wrapped in silk kaza. The mother happy, worshipped the tooth everyday on the altar. However, the teeth was actually a dog's teeth that the son had picked on realizing that he forgot about her request again. Her faith was so strong that when she died, she obtained a rainbow body and became an enlightened one.

We see that there are times when there is no way in which we can cross-check a particular ritual, scripture or in the case of this story, the tooth. The only plausible thing to do would be to have faith in the process. Religion is about faith and Buddha's teachings are based on doing what is righteous, so as long as one keeps faith and does no harm to other living beings in the process, the only thing that counts in the end is sincerity.

---

### Bibliography

- Buddhism: The Buddha, History, Practices and Art . (2022). *World Religions* .
- Analayo, B. (2020). *Early Buddhist Oral Transmission and the Problem of Accurate Source Monitoring*. Retrieved from Mindfulness 11.
- BBC. (2022). *Practices in Buddhism*. Retrieved from Worship and Rituals: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zkdbcj6/revision/2>
- Buddhist Mythology*. (2022, August 23). Retrieved from Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist\\_mythology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_mythology)
- Hanh, T. N. (2016). *Old Path White Clouds* (22 ed.). New Delhi, India: Full Circle Publishing Pvt. Ltd.

**Theme: "What's in Folklore is NOT in "Grilling"**

Karma-glin-pa. (1992). *The Tibetan book of the dead : the great liberation through hearing in the Bardo*. Boston: Shambala.

Lopez, D. S. (Ed.). (2004). *Buddhist Scriptures*. England: Penguin Books.

Phuntsho, K. (2018). *Sipa Khorlo: Wheel of Life. Mandala* .

Wynne, A. (2004). The Oral Transmission of the Early Buddhist Literature. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* , 27.

མོ་སྒྲིང་དགེ་བཤེས་དབལ་ལྗན་གཞུང་།. (2018). *དམ་ཚིག་རྣམ་བཤེན་མེ* (3rd Edition ed.). འབྲས་ལྷུང་ས་མོ་གསལ་སྒྲིང་དཔེ་མཛོད་ཁང་.

