

Sharing the Gospel with My Tibetan Friends

Preface

My efforts to know my Tibetan friends come out of a heart that is longing to know what they believe. My wife and I have been living amongst the Tibetan people these past 19 years, where we have gotten to know them in the mission field. It is through this experience I have written this little book with the hope that it will be useful for finding out the right method to share the gospel with them.

Therefore, this writing is mainly about what we have experienced in the mission field; it is not a way of studying the books about Buddhism that have been written before. So, what we have seen and heard from my Tibetan friends is what I have tried to write.

This writing is also the result of conversations and interviews with some of them. During the conversations, I tried to ask them about their daily life which of course is very much related to their belief, and then compare it with books related to it. That is the reason I use their language and writing, to enable us to understand what they mean when they use certain words so that we can understand them rightly. Most of these Tibetan friends of mine are university students, and some of them practice their religion faithfully.

Introduction

The word Buddhism is obviously related to Buddha who gives “the teaching” or *dharma* to his followers and those who practice his philosophy.

As for Tibetan people, we seldom hear that word; what we often hear them calling themselves is *nang ba cho lug*. *Nang ba* means the inside people, and *cho lug* means religion. So *nang ba cho lug* means “the inside people’s religion” (Tibetan Buddhism). Therefore, other religions apart from Tibetan Buddhism are called “the outsider’s religion”.

They also have another way of calling themselves: *Lha cho ba*. *Lha* means spirit or idol, *cho* means religion. *Lha cho ba* literally means “religion that believes in many spirits/idols”, in other words, it is not monotheism. It is because of this that when a person shares the Good News of Jesus to Tibetan people, they can receive it as one of the many spirits that can be worshiped. They can add the gospel we share with them to the belief they already have. Once, one of my Tibetan friends was asked by her Tibetan friend, “Who is Jesus?” She answered, “It is the god/spirit that foreigners worship.”

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A brief comparison between Christianity and Buddhism

	Christianity	Buddhism
Salvation	Saved from the wrath of God. (Roman 8:1)	<i>Tharba</i> ཐར་བ། means one is saved from the state of being reborn in one of the six cycles of existence and become non-existent (where there is no more suffering).
Heaven	A place that Jesus prepares for those who believe in Him. (John 14:2)	Nirvana: a word which is not equivalent to heaven in the Bible. There is another word they call <i>Lhayul</i> ལྷ་ཡུལ། which means the place of spirits or gods.
Hell	A place for eternal punishment for those who reject Jesus Christ. (2 Thes 1:9)	<i>Nyelwa</i> དམྱལ་བ། which means the lowest state among the six cycles of existence where they suffer from the flame of fire and the cold. They say it is still possible to come out of <i>nyelwa</i> . Now, who are they that go to <i>nyelwa</i> ? They don't talk about the body. It is the <i>namshe</i> of a person that goes to <i>nyelwa</i> .
The Next Life	The life in the second coming of Jesus Christ. (Rev 22:3-5) In Biblical terms, the next life is when Jesus comes again. He will raise the dead, and those who believe in Him will be with Him in heaven where there is no more suffering.	<i>Tse chima</i> ཚེ་ཅི་མ། When a human dies, he will be reborn in one of the six realms, and there he will continue to suffer. This is what they mean by <i>tse chima</i> .

What about sin and forgiveness of sin? In Buddhism, we don't find the forgiveness of sin or the one who can forgive sin. Sin has nothing to do with God or breaking God's law. Also, when talking about salvation they don't mean being saved from the eternal coming punishment, but saved from the suffering of being reborn in the six realms of existence.

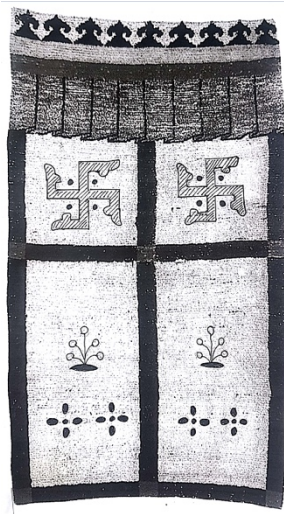
Warning: We need to be careful when using Biblical terms, for they have a Buddhist understanding for each word. In other words when we use a Biblical word we need to explain it clearly and clarify what it means and what it doesn't mean. This is to avoid building up something on the basis of Buddhist understanding which may lead to syncretism.

Door Curtain *Go Yol* མོ་ཡོ།

To begin with, I will start from the daily life of my Tibetan friends. One of the Tibetan house characteristics is that they like to hang a door curtain on their door. This door curtain is normally made of fabric with different colors, and they place pictures of *yung zhung* on it.

It is believed that this picture of *yung zhung* can overturn the bad luck as well as increase good luck. During the winter season, this door curtain can also protect the household from the cold and strong wind. They also like to draw *yung zhung* on their walls or other places. In addition to *yung zhung*, Tibetan people have many other symbols.

A typical Tibetan door curtain with *yung zhung* on it.



yung

Note:

As we see this door curtain with *yung zhung* on it, we know that our Tibetan friends are aware of bad luck or misfortune. The reason they draw or place *yung zhung* in their homes is because of fear. They also believe *yung zhung* can bring fortunes into the house where it is placed.

Mat 28:16-20: This part of God's word says that Jesus has power in heaven and on earth.

John 6:1-15: Jesus gave food to eat for 5000 people. Every good gift comes from God.

Can you think of any other Bible passages that may help our Tibetan friends?

Walking Around Gorwa Gyap སྐོར་བ་བརྒྱབ་པ།

One of the religious activities can be seen every day in Lhasa city is "walking around". People walk around the monastery, around the Potala Palace, and there are also some who walk around Lhasa city. While they are walking around, one hand is spinning a prayer wheel and the other hand is counting (*zheng wa*) རྩེད་བ། a rosary. Some people are also saying certain mantras. They are usually doing this in the morning or late afternoon. During the "Saga Dawa" festival, they do this activity from morning until evening. How many times a person can walk around depends on each person's ability. The more a person can go around the better. By doing this activity they accumulate merit and at the same time it lessens their sin. They also believe that by doing this it will affect their next life (*tse chi ma*) ཚེ་ཅི་མ།. They will be reborn in a better state in one of six cycles existence called (*zho wa rik chung*) འགོ་བ་རིགས་དུག

Note:

How can we share the Gospel to our Tibetan friends with all these practices as their background? They talk about sin, they know it, and yet their understanding about it is different from a Biblical understanding. For example, one of the worst sins for them is to kill a living being, and this includes killing a little insect such as a mosquito, an ant, or a worm that we step on while we walk on the ground.

Therefore, as they live their lives everyday, consciously or not, they accumulate demerit (*mi ge wa*) མི་དགོ་བ།. It is in order to reduce or lessen their sin that they diligently accumulate merit (*ge wa*) དགོ་བ།. In other words, they don't know that it is God who has authority to forgive sin, and they are not seeking Him. So, when we tell them "Jesus Christ died to forgive your sin", it is far from their understanding. As sin for them is different from Biblical understanding, so it is that the way sin can be forgiven is also not clear for them. They are very diligent to do religious action to accumulate merit, so that their sin will be decreased. In other words, there is no absolute way of being forgiven.

Mark 2:5 "[Jesus] said . . ., "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Can you think of any other passages that may help our Tibetan friends?

Tibetan Festivals *Du Chen* དུས་ཚེན།

A. Losar ལོ་གསར།

Losar: *Lo* means “year”, *sar* means “new”. *Losar* means "New Year". Tibetan New Year is usually in January or February. On New Year's Eve, the family members usually get together and have a big meal. Most family will also make fried dough with different shapes. They normally wear new and beautiful clothes during this celebration. On the first day of New Year they don't visit each other. From the second day on, they start to visit relatives and close friends. During New Year celebrations they are not supposed to say negative words such as *die*, *broken*, *lost*, *run out* etc. This is to show their hope for the new year, that none of these negative words will happen to the family.

B. Saga Dawa ས་ག་ལྷ་བ།

Tibetan people celebrate "Saga Dawa" to commemorate three things. First, Sakyamuni's birthday, second, his becoming Buddha, and third, his death. It is believed that Sakyamuni was born, became Buddha and died in the fourth Tibetan lunar month (April-May). During this month, we can see obvious signs of many people celebrating this festival in Lhasa city. There are so many people walking around monasteries, around the Potala Palace, and even around Lhasa city. While they are walking, they throw juniper into a stove that's prepared by the road. They call this activity *sang dang* བསང་གཏོང་བ།, which makes smoke and the aroma fills the air. During this month, there are also many beggars not far from the Potala Palace who are waiting for people who are walking around to give them money. Tibetan people believe that practicing these religious activities during the *Saga Dawa* festival multiply their merit. During this festival, Tibetan people don't eat meat and eggs to avoid killing animals which would mean demerit. Tibetan people see this month as a month of accumulating merit. All the activities last through the whole month.

C. Shodon ལོ་སྟོན།

Shodon in Tibetan means “Sour Milk” (Yogurt) Festival. Tibetan people celebrate *Shodon* in July. At this time the lamas (priests) and monks finish a period of time when they do all their activities inside the monastery in order to avoid treading on and killing tiny insects. They call this period of time *yarne* དབྱུང་གནས།. After this period of time is over, people will come to offer yogurt to lamas and at the same time they also ask for blessings.

This festival is also known as the Buddha Exhibition Festival. During this festival, a huge Buddha picture is taken by many lamas from Zhe Bung monastery and they carry it to the mountain place, where the Buddha picture exhibition normally takes place. The Buddha picture known as a *thangka* will be unrolled slowly so people can see it along the side of the mountain, after which people offer many white scarfs called *khada* in front of the Buddha picture. Also, juniper smoke arises from all directions. After about two hours of exhibition, this huge *thangka* Buddha picture

will be rolled up and put back in its place. This Buddha picture exhibition only takes place once a year during the *Shodon* festival. After this exhibition the people will make their way to Norbulingka, where there will be more activities such as watching Tibetan opera, dancing etc. There is plenty of food and drink, and they set up tents to enjoy the pleasant summer. The *Shodon* festival usually last up to seven days

D. Ongkor འོང་ཚོགས།

Ongkor in Tibetan means Harvest Festival. This *Ongkor* festival is celebrated in the farming areas in Tibet, and is usually held in the month of August. During this time the crops are ready for harvest. The family gather on their farmland, then carry a scripture book called a *becha* དབེ་ཆ། on their back usually accompanied by the sounds of ritual trumpets and drums. They march around the farmland and in this way worship their gods. During this festival, they also perform other activities such as singing, dancing, horse racing. etc. *Ongkor* not only shows people's wish for a good harvest but also is a good time for the farmers to rest. The *Ongkor* festival usually lasts up to three days.

Note:

There are some other Tibetan festivals that are not mentioned here. However, from these four examples, let us now look at how we can share the good news of Jesus with them.

From the way these festivals are held, it is not clear that they understand to whom they are expressing their thankfulness and gratitude. It is because they don't know God the Creator who gives rain, causes plants to grow, and gives a good harvest.

One part of the Bible that we could share with my Tibetan friends is from Genesis, chapters 1 and 2.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:28, NIV)

This is the God who can give blessing, for He is the only creator and source of all blessings. If we could only tell our Tibetan friends that this God the Creator is the one who has blessed their crops, and given them good harvest. Then they would know to whom they should address their gratitude and thankfulness.

Can you think of other parts from the Bible that we can share with them?

Celestial Burial (Sky Burial)

Most Tibetan people practice celestial burial (sky burial). When one of the family members dies, lamas or monks are usually invited to perform rituals that needs to be done. The deceased is usually not to be moved from the place where he or she died. The lamas will offer prayer in order that the (soul) *nam she* རྣམ་ཤེས། will leave the body. Tibetan people believe that when a person dies, the *namshe* will leave the body, and after leaving the body it will continue to exist. Sometimes they say this may take a few days. Even after the *namshe* is released from the body, sometimes it still lingers around the house of the deceased person. Sometimes this *namshe* can even cause harm to the people around, as one of my Tibetan friends believed took place in her village. During this time period, the relatives, friends and neighbors can come to offer their condolences. They normally bring with them roasted barley flour (*tsampa*) ཅམ་བ།, butter (*mar*) མར།, scarves (*kada*) ལ་བ་ཏྱགས།, or money. The scarves are given to the dead person, therefore they are all placed by the deceased. While the *namshe* is still believed to be lingering around, the family usually light a number of butter lamps in multiples of a minimum of seven. So, they may light 7 or 14 or 21 and so on. These butter lamps are meant to give light on the road where the *namshe* will go through. The *namshe* is then believed to go to one of the six cycles existence (*Zhowa rik zhug*) འགྲོ་བ་རིགས་བྱུག as its final destination.

During this period of mourning, the members of the family are prohibited from washing their face, combing their hair or wearing any jewelry. Laughing, dancing, and singing are also prohibited in order for the *namshe* to be released from the deceased easily. Wedding and other happy celebrations are normally postponed.

In a little clay pot, they usually burn incense with roasted barley flour and butter. They believe that after the *namshe* is released from the deceased, it still needs food to eat, since it cannot find its food any longer. In this way, the family provides the food for the *namshe*.

The family chooses the day when the burial will take place. The family delivers the dead body to the professional corpse handler. Only two or three of the family members can go to the burial place to make sure that it is done properly. As the corpse carrier leaves the house, none of them is allowed to look back to the house of the dead person. Even after the burial is complete, these members of the family are not allowed to come back to the house of the deceased. They can only come home two or three days after the burial day. This is meant to prevent the *namshe* (as believed) from coming home, which can cause harm or misfortune.

When the deceased body is placed in the usual platform up on the mountain, they will burn incense together with *tsampa*. The aroma from the burned incense attracts vultures (birds), which always come because they smell the smoke associated with this ritual. The man will cut the corpse in a specific way, and then offer the pieces to the vultures. The left over remains of the corpse not eaten by the vultures or small pieces will then be burnt in the fire. Once the celestial burial is done, the family members will give the corpse carrier barley beer or yak meat as a gratitude for their service. This is how my Tibetan friends do their celestial burial. In different places, there may be some minor variations.

Note: With this celestial burial ritual of our Tibetan friends in mind, let us think how we can share the good news of Jesus with them.

The immediate question that comes to mind would be:

Is the *namshe* རྣམ་ཤེས། of a person that my Tibetan friends know, the same as the spirit of a person that is mentioned in the Bible? The answer is absolutely not!

As it was said earlier, once the *namshe* is release off the deceased, it will make its way to the six cycles of existence, where it will continue to exist and suffer through the rounds of rebirth which my Tibetan friends call *zhowa rik zhug* འགོ་བ་རིགས་བྱུག་.

In other words, this *namshe* will be reborn in one form of six kinds of being, although the following three are more typical: an animal, a hungry ghost, or as a human being.

Genesis 2:7 Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Genesis 3:19 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food, until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.

Psalm 104: 28-30

Ecclesiastes 12:7 And the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Again, the *namshe* that my Tibetan friends are familiar with is not the same as the spirit of a human mentioned in the Bible. The reason is quite clear, *namshe* can go into other beings or be reborn as an animal or other kind, whilst the Bible specifically mentioned that when a person dies, the spirit returns to God who gave it. We need to be clear that it is not *namshe* but it is the spirit of a human that returns to God who gave it, and the dust returns to the ground from which it was taken.

In Hebrew, it also talks about this:

Hebrews 9:27 Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.

Sin *Digpa* རྗེག་པ།

Every religion surely will talk about sin, and the way out of sin or the way to be free from sin.

The Bible says in 1 John 3:4 “Everyone who sins is breaking God's law, for all sin is contrary to the law of God. Therefore, this is between humans and God.

For Tibetan people there are two ways of describing sin. They call it *dig pa* (sin) རྗེག་པ།, or *mi gewa* (demerit) མི་དགོ་བ།. In summary, their definition of them is “All things inside the heart or deeds which do not increase merit.”

Another important concept to understand is that my Tibetan friends always associate merit (good deeds) with demerit (bad deeds). The demerit must be balanced out with enough merit in order to achieve a better reborn state in the next life. my Tibetan friends have a saying for it, they call it *ge dig* which means ‘merit and demerit’.

In other words, when they talk about sin it has nothing to do with breaking God's law.

Tibetan Buddhism classifies sin into three categories:

A. Sin which is committed or done through the body:

1. Killing
2. Stealing
3. Sexual sin

B. Sin which is committed through the mouth:

4. Lying
5. Gossiping
6. Saying harsh speech
7. Saying meaningless or pointless talk

C. Sin which is done in the heart:

8. Covetousness
9. Wishing to do evil to others
10. Having a wrong view (opposing Buddhism)

Let us now seek to elaborate the 10 types of sin as mentioned above.

1. Killing (*Sok joba*) རྗེག་གཙོག་པ།

Killing (*Sok joba*) རྗེག་གཙོག་པ། literally means taking the life of a person or animal. Killing is associated with sin by Tibetans not only for killing a human but also for killing any kind of animal such as hunting, slaughtering cows, lambs, fishing, killing mosquitoes, ants, etc. They teach not just to abandon the act of killing, but also instead to do the actions that save lives. Living among Tibetans has given us time to see how this is practiced. For example, they let mosquitoes out of the window in order to save their lives; they buy fish from the market and return them into the river.

One of my Tibetan friends, who is from a nomad family, has 40 sheep and 40 yaks. Among these 40 sheep, two of them have red tags hung on their ears. This red tag is a sign that shows this family has saved the lives of these two sheep. They bought these two sheep while they were being sold to be slaughtered, they brought them home and added them to their own sheep, and they will never be slaughtered. They call this act of saving lives *tsetar* ཚེ་ཐར།

Some Tibetan people, when eating meat, say a kind of prayer: "May I be free from sin that killed this animal, then they eat it." In this case, we see their conscience is always there to blame them.

They classify sins and mention that there are 10 kinds of them, yet killing is the worst among them. They also said those who committed this sin they will have a short life and will never be happy. At the same time, they say those who save lives will live longer in this world and they won't have much sickness.

Let us put our attention to how my Tibetan friends have gone wrong from the standard that God says about sin in the Bible. According to 1 John 3:4, sin is breaking God's law. In Genesis 3, Adam broke God's law (God's word). Therefore, whoever breaks God's law, that is sin. And the way to be free from sin has to be from God alone. Here we realise it is not easy for us to share with them the message about forgiveness of sin, because they don't know God the Creator whose law we have broken.

A question might come out: "Why do my Tibetan friends see killing a human and killing a mosquito is in the same category of sin?" The answer is because their deceased grandfather or great grandfather's *namshe* might have gotten into this mosquito, therefore killing this mosquito is the same as killing their deceased grandfather, whose *namshe* has reborn in this mosquito. Here, my Tibetan friends have gone astray far from the standard that God the Creator made.

2. Stealing *Ma chinbar lenba* མ་ཕྱིན་པར་ལེན་པ།

The first thing we need to know is they describe stealing as "taking things which are not given." Then, as it was said before that they always say demerit and merit go together, so it is explained here: abandon taking things which are not given to you, instead do the act of giving things to others. As a result, the person who does not steal will have an abundance in this life; he will not have many enemies and thieves will not steal his property.

3. Sexual sin *Log yem* ལོག་པའི་མཁའ།

My Tibetan friends are taught to abandon all lust and sexual misconduct (*log yem*); not only that, but they are to cultivate their marriage relationship. *Log yem* is defined as improper sexual conduct. However, my Tibetan friends' cultural expression of marriage needs to be explained. It is common among my Tibetan friends, for example, for three brothers in a family to be married to the same woman. This arrangement is considered normal and its purpose is to preserve the family income. They do not consider this to be a sexual misconduct or sin.

4. Telling a lie or deceiving *zun sung wa* རྩོན་གསུང་བ།

My Tibetan friends are taught not to tell lies, and instead to speak what is true.

5. Telling something which is not true about other people/gossip, *Zha ma*, ལྷན་མཁུ་

Saying things which are not true that cause disharmony or discord. So here my Tibetan friends are taught to abandon saying what is not true, and not only to say what is true but also to try to say things which cause harmony (merit).

6. Saying harsh words *tsig tsub* ཚིག་རྩུབ།

My Tibetan friends are taught to abandon saying harsh words, instead to say words that are pleasant to be heard.

7. Saying meaningless/pointless words, *ngag gyel* ངག་འབྲུག།

My Tibetan friends are also taught to give up pointless talk, but instead to speak the word of prayer or mantra.

8. Covetousness, *nab sem* བརྒྱུ་སེམས།

My Tibetan friends are taught to abandon covetousness, and instead to have a generous attitude, and give to others.

9. Wishing to do evil to others, *no sem* གཞོད་སེམས།

My Tibetan friends are taught to abandon the desire to do evil to others, instead to do what is beneficial to others.

10. Having a wrong view (opposing Buddhism), *log da*. ལོག་ནྟ།

My Tibetan friends are taught to give up all wrong views especially about Buddhism, and instead to keep the correct view. For example, that one needs to keep in heart and mind the teaching of karma cause and effect, *gyu zhe*. ལྷུ་འབྲས། , (and also other Buddhist teachings). All views that do not go along with Buddhist teaching need to be abandoned, and instead my Tibetan friends are taught to stay true to the teaching of Buddhism.

From the lists of sins mentioned above, my Tibetan friends are not taught to seek forgiveness for their sins. Instead my Tibetan friends are taught to simply do more good deeds to reduce their sins. For example, if one has stolen something, he or she will need to be more generous and, in this way, lessens his or her sin. Each sin always has an opposite act, that would lessen the sin. The purpose is not only that sin will be lessened but also in order that one can be reborn in a better realm, in the next life. At the same time, this will also cause them to have a good life and be honored by others. For example, if a person does not kill but instead saves many lives, he will have a long life and good health in this world. In short, we can say my Tibetan friends believe that the one who does good deeds or merit will receive good things not only in this world but also in the next life.

John 16:8 When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.

Amulet *Sungwa* ལྷ་བ།

My Tibetan friends love to wear amulets. When they are asked why they like them, their answer first is that they wear them to protect them from danger in this world. And the second reason is to remind them of the speech of the lama or priest they believe in. One of the amulets they like to wear is a photo of the lama which they wear as a necklace. They use the term, *den ba* དེན་བ། which means reliance or to rely on. Therefore, the amulet or the photo of the lama that they are wearing is the one they rely on or the one they trust in, to protect them day by day in their lives, and it makes them feel secure.

Note: With this background in mind, how can we share the gospel with our Tibetan friends?

Mat. 28:18-20 All authority in heaven and on earth is in Jesus.

Numbers 23:23. No curse can touch Jacob; No magic has any power against Israel.








1 John 4:4 But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won the victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world.

Are there any other passages from the Bible that we can share with our Tibetan friends, specifically related to the power of darkness?

Eight Symbols of Good Luck or Happiness *Zhaxi Tag Gye* བཀྲ་ཤིས་རྟམ་མཁོ་

བཀྲ་ཤིས་

My Tibetan friends have many symbols related to what they believe. These symbols impact their lives very much. Therefore, we can see symbols or pictures on their walls, on top of their roofs and in many other places. Here is one group of symbols called *zhaxi tag gye* which means eight symbols of good luck or happiness. Let us see them one by one.

<p>Umbrella <i>dug</i> གཏུགས། This umbrella symbolizes Buddha that can clear away all emotional obscurations (darkness), and can also protect against all kinds of obstacles and harm.</p>	
<p>A Pair or Golden Fish <i>ser nya</i> གསེར་ཉ། This picture of golden fish symbolizes knowledge and wisdom. It also symbolizes unchanging love; love between parents, teacher and student, and between man and woman.</p>	
<p>A Treasure Vase <i>pumb</i> བུམ་བུ། This treasure vase symbolizes the fullness of knowledge and fortune, and it also symbolizes prosperity.</p>	
<p>Lotus Flower <i>bema</i> བད་མ། This picture of a lotus flower symbolizes Buddha's purity and sinlessness. Though it grows in the dirty mud, its flower is clean and beautiful.</p>	
<p>A White Conch Shell <i>dungkar</i> ཏུང་དྭགས་གཡས་འབྱིལ། A white conch with its coil reverting to the right instead of to the left, symbolizes the sound of <i>dharm</i>a which can be heard in all directions.</p>	
<p>An Endless Knot or Knot of Eternity <i>bebeu</i> དདམས་བེའུ། This picture of an endless knot symbolizes perfect knowledge and wisdom. It also symbolizes good relationships in this life such as the relationship between man and woman, or parents and children.</p>	
<p>Banner of Victory <i>gyelzen</i> རྒྱལ་མཚན། This picture of Banner of Victory symbolizes the victory over all that is opposing to Buddhists. It also symbolizes overcoming enemies and sickness.</p>	
<p>Wheel of Doctrine <i>korlo</i> འཕོར་ལོ། This picture of a wheel symbolizes the cyclical nature of life. It also represents the training of Buddha which is transferred to his students.</p>	

Note: With this belief of symbols in mind, how can we share the Gospel with our Tibetan friends?

The Six Symbols of Long Life

Most of my Tibetan friends love this picture of 'Six Symbols of Long Life', and they have it in their homes. If we look carefully, we see that there are six different objects in this picture which we will consider one by one.

1. *Vajra Mountain*

It is believed that a long time ago there came into being an indestructible *Rocky Mountain* by the blessing of Buddha.

2. From this indestructible *Rocky Mountain* there flowed out '***the water of long life***'

3. From the flow of the stream of *the water of long life*, '***a tree of long life***' appeared. This tree of long life has many fruits, and its fruits have eight excellent flavors.

4. In front of this *tree of long life* there came into being '***a man of long life***'

5. From the tiny drops of water that this *man of long life* dropped, there came into being '***a deer of long life***'.

6. The birds enjoying the fruit of the *tree of long life* and the *water of long life* became '***the bird of long life***'.

My Tibetan friends love to put this picture of the Six Symbols of Long Life up in their home, because it is believed that this picture can prevent disasters and gives long life. They do not know that a picture does not have life to give. My Tibetan friends do not know that it is God who gives life, and long life.

Note: With the meaning of this picture in mind, how can we share the gospel with our Tibetan friends?

My impression is that my Tibetan friends love to have long life in this world. Beside this there is also a fear of dying at a young age, yet they don't know who can fulfill their wish and hope.

Verses that might help us:

2 Kings 20:1-11

Genesis 2:7

John 11:25-26



Six Symbols of Long Life

Family Prayer Room *Chokang* མཚོན་ཁང་།

Most Tibetan people have a private prayer room in their homes called a *chokang*. This *chokang* is an important part of the house, where the family rituals are performed. Inside this *chokang*, normally there is an altar where images are placed. In front of the images are offerings such as butter lamps, burning incense, and water in cups. The number of these butter lamps and the cups are normally in multiples of seven. One of the family members usually pours out the water and changes it with a new one every morning. On the altar there are also some Buddhist Scriptures called *becha* དཔེ་ཆ།. This 'scripture' will be read by a family member on occasions. Along the wall, Tibetan scroll-paintings known as *thangka* are hung.

These rituals are performed to increase their merits, which they believe will lessen sin and will affect their next life. Often when bad luck or sickness occurs within the family, they will ask a lama for the reason why it happened, and the lama often answers it is because the family has been reluctant to do these rituals. But some of my Tibetan friends who are university students start to ask questions in their hearts; "Is it true that because we are reluctant to do these rituals, we got sick?" It seems that university students have a wider outlook, and often like to question what they have been told. They know if they do not look after their health, they will fall sick for sure.

Note: Could you think of methods on how to share the gospel with our Tibetan friends?

Maybe we can say that in fact our Tibetan friends are a group of people who long for God. Their everyday life is very much marked with rituals and acts of religion. I am convinced that Genesis 1-3 is a part of the Bible that needs to be shared with them. I usually begin with how God created humans in the beginning. Then humans fell into sin, and this is the beginning of all suffering. Then from here I move on to John 1:1-18. This God who created everything has become a human being and lived among mankind. It is this God that we are to worship. He is the source of all perfect gifts and blessings, who can set us free from all bad luck, sickness and sufferings.

Six Cycles of Existence *Zhowa Rikzhug* འཇོ་བ་རིགས་རྒྱུག

One of the main Buddhist teachings is *zhowa rik zhug* འཇོ་བ་རིགས་རྒྱུག which means Life Cycle of Existences (of sentient beings who suffer through the round of rebirth). What we can understand about *zhowa rikzhug*? It does not have a beginning and does not have an ending. It keeps going around and around. They call it *rang shin gy* རང་བཞིན་གྱིས། which means naturally inherent. This simple picture will help us to understand.



The six cycles of existence

There are six cycles of existence that go around in this picture of a wheel.

The three at the left side are:

1. *Lha* ལྷ། means god or spirit being.
2. *Lhamayin* ལྷ་མ་ཡིན། means demi god.
3. *Mi* མི། means human being.

The three levels at the right side are:

4. *Duzho* དུང་འཕྲོ། means animals that have four legs.
5. *Yidag* ཡི་དྲུགས། means hungry ghost. A being with very narrow throat and big stomach, that makes it always hungry.
6. *Nyelwa* དརྱལ་བ། means hell being, or being that inhabit hell.

They consider the three levels on the left side as the high levels called *tho ri sum* མཐོ་རིས་གསུམ།. There is happiness and enjoyment on these levels or states. But each level also has its own suffering. They consider the three levels on the right side as the low levels called *ngen song sum* ངན་སོང་གསུམ།. There is only suffering in these levels. As mentioned before, each level has its own suffering. One of the main Buddhist teachings is how to be free or liberated from these sufferings, and to be able to enter *nirvana*. As far as I have learnt, their definition of nirvana is different from the word heaven in our Biblical understanding. Another word for my Tibetan friends to describe nirvana is *sang gyeba* སངས་རྒྱལ་བ།. It means the state of being free from rebirth into the six cycles of existence. In other words, *nirvana* is not a place, but a state or a condition, where there is no more suffering.

Now let us look at the suffering of human beings (*mi* མི།) as defined by my Tibetan friends. Human beings have four kinds of suffering and these are: birth, old age, sickness and death. They call this *gye ga na chi* གྱེ་ག་ན་ཅི།. If we look back at Buddhist teaching about being free from suffering, one can see that even if a person

is able to be reborn as a human being (which is considered a high level), sufferings still exist in this realm. They ultimately say that there is no place without suffering.

As it was said before, for them salvation means being free from the six cycles of existence, but they also say salvation (*tharba*) means being saved from the three lower states *ngen song sum* and to be reborn in one of the higher levels (*tho ri*) མཐོ་རིམ། for there is still happiness and enjoyment in it.

Within the three high realms *tho ri* as described above (gods, demi gods, and human beings), there are seven kinds of happiness or enjoyment:

1. Long life
2. Having good health
3. Being strong
4. Being happy/blessed
5. Having high knowledge
6. Being rich
7. Having high wisdom

If a human has all these seven kinds of happiness they call it *pun sum zogba* ཕུན་སུམ་ཚོགས་པ། which means prosperous. This also motivates them to do religious practices so that they can experience all these seven kinds of happiness.

Within the three low realms *ngen song sum* (animals, hungry ghosts, inhabitants of hell), there are mostly only sufferings. These sufferings are: hunger, flame of fire, and cold. There is almost no happiness or enjoyment. That is why when they say *tharbe lam* ཐར་བའི་ལམ། which means the way of salvation, they also mean being saved from these three low realms and being born in one of the three high realms. It is said that Buddhists are people who are motivated by fear of suffering in the cyclic rebirth and fear of being born in a lower realm. Therefore, they diligently perform religious practices by relying on Buddha, his teachings, and monks (*Koncho sum*) དགོན་མཚོགས་གསུམ།

Note: With these six cycles of existence background in mind, how can we share the gospel with our Tibetan friends?

My answer is, first we are not only saved from sufferings alone. We are saved from the eternal coming wrath of God, and enter heaven to be with God forever. John 14:2.

In the Bible, we have seen the life of mankind is not in the wheel of life. It has a beginning and an ending. God created humans in His image; a human has never changed into an animal. In other words, a human is always a human and an animal is always an animal.

Genesis 2:7 Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Revelation 21-22 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

Hebrews 9:27 Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.

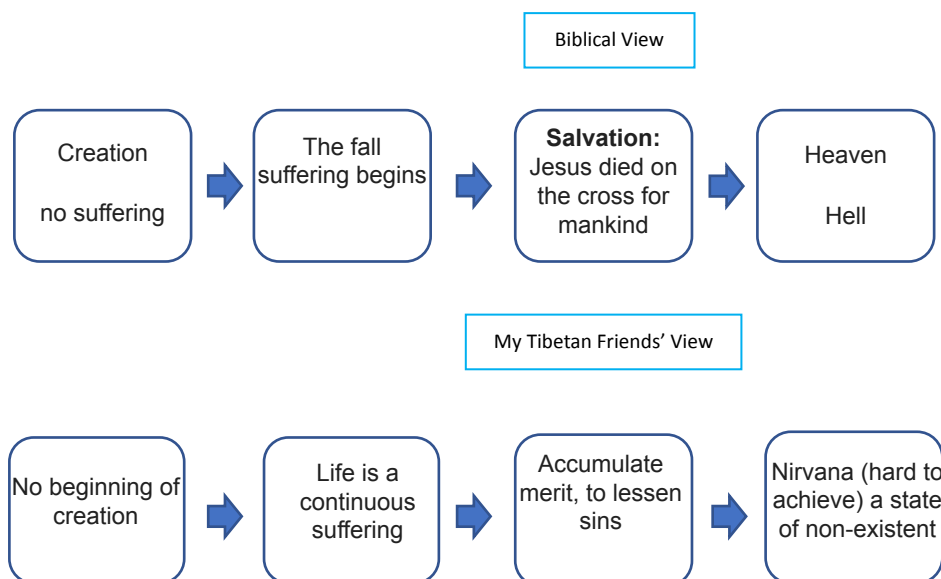
Zechariah 12:1 The LORD, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the human spirit within a person, declares . . .

Ecc 12:7. And the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Psalm 104: 28-30, Eccl 9:5-6

As it was said before, one of the main Tibetan Buddhist teachings is how to be freed from all this suffering.

- We know in the Bible (Genesis 1, 2 and Rev 21) there is no suffering in the beginning and in the end.
- Suffering begins after the fall (Genesis 3).
- God provided a way to be freed from suffering and death in His Son Jesus who died on the cross. (John 14:6)
- Therefore, in heaven there will be no more suffering and death. This is our destination who are in Christ. (Rev 21)
- Those who are outside Christ will suffer eternal punishment. This is their destination who are not freed by Christ (Revelation 20:15).



Karma *Le* ལས། or *Gyu Dang Zhebu* ལྷ་དང་འབྲས་བུ།

Gyu means cause, *zhe* or *zhebu* means fruit or result. *Gyu dang zhebu* means 'the cause and the result' known as *karma*. All one's deeds and behavior have results, and especially will affect one's next life.

People who accumulate good deeds will be reborn in the higher realms *tho ri sum* མཐོ་རིས་གསུམ།. Meanwhile people who accumulate bad actions will be reborn in the lower realms *ngen song sum* ངན་སོང་གསུམ།. The same thing occurs if someone now, here in this world is a rich person and in good health, this is only the result of good deeds that have been done in the past. And also, if someone now, here in this world is poor, uneducated, and unhealthy, this is also only the result of the bad actions that had been accumulated in the past.

One of my Tibetan friends told me about the story of his family like this:

In Tibet, there are normally examinations or tests to get into certain jobs or positions. This friend of mine attended the test and was the only Tibetan to pass the exam for the position. He also has an older brother at home who even though he is smarter than him, did not have the same opportunity as he did. My friend now has a good job and lives in the city. Meanwhile his older brother stays in their village and is working as a driver. They say his older brother's *karma* is not as good as his. His *karma* determines his life. This means there was a bad man who lived years ago, and now his elder brother receives the fruit or result of this previous life. When that bad man died, his *namshe* went into his elder brother's body, when his brother was just a newborn baby. To be a driver is his *karma*, and not to be a rich man.

Karma, "Cause and Effect", has impacted my Tibetan friends deeply. They diligently accumulate merits in order that in their next life they can be reborn into a better realm. But the past deeds cannot be canceled. No matter how hard my friend's elder brother works, he will never become a wealthy man.

Note: Could you find passages from the Bible that can shed light onto this dark understanding that our Tibetan friends have?

Romans 3:23; 6:23 "For all have sinned . . . for the wages of sin is death." This is our status, all have sinned. "But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

2 Cor 5: 17 "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here."

This is the way of salvation or liberation for my Tibetan friends and for all of us sinners, descendants of Adam. His status changes when he becomes a new creation in Christ.

Sentient Beings *Semjen* སེམ་ཇེན།

Sem means heart, *jen* means to have; *semjen* means every being that has a feeling and desire in their heart. In other words, human beings and animals are both called *semjen*.

One of my Tibetan friends had the opportunity to read the book of Genesis chapters 1-12. When we went through Gen 8:20-21 that says, "Then Noah . . . taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed offering on it. The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma . . ." This passage really shocked her then she asked: "Why is it that killing these animals is pleasing God? Doesn't God love animals as we do?" From this, we understand my Tibetan friends better. Firstly, killing animals means killing a being that can feel hurt just like human beings. Secondly, they place mankind and animals in the same category; that means humans have a body and *namshe* and animals also have the same, therefore killing an animal can mean killing one own's own ancestor that has lived before, whose *namshe* now went into the animal that is being killed.

How can we share the Gospel with our Tibetan friends who place themselves on the same level with animals, where both humans and animals have feelings; they can feel hurt, sad, and both also have a body and *namshe*?

We really appreciate comments, suggestions or passages from God's word that may help us in finding a better way to share the Gospel with our Tibetan friends.

Interview

One of my ways to get to know my Tibetan friends better is by having a one to one interview about their beliefs in regards to creation. My interview questions came from Psalms 104: 29-30. I used the concepts contained in these verses to question my Tibetan friends about their beliefs.

Psalms 104: 29-30

- ²⁹ When you hide your face,
they are terrified;
when you take away their breath,
they die and return to the dust.
- ³⁰ When you send your Spirit,
they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.

Some other relevant verses I drew my questions from were:

Genesis 2:7 Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Zechariah 12:1 The LORD, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the human spirit within a person, declares:

From these verses, we know that it is God who forms the spirit within a human, and when God takes away his spirit; he dies and returns to dust.

From a number of one-on-one interviews with my Tibetan friends, here are some of the conversations summarized:

Background of interviewee:

A university student. He had a keen interest in his own religion and visits the monasteries on a regular basis to learn from the monks. He is quite dedicated in studying and learning from the books of his religion.

There were five other students interviewed with similar background as above.

Topic 1: God and mankind

Question 1: What do you know about God?

Answer: I have only heard that foreigners believe in God. I myself as a Tibetan, we have faith in Kon Cho.

Kon Cho means: Kon: Rare

Cho: The best/precious/jewels

In other words, there are three precious jewels that we believe as Kon Cho, and these are:

1. Buddha
2. The teaching of Buddha
3. Monkhood

Question 2: What is your opinion about the spirit inside a person?

Answer: I have never heard of the term spirit. All I know is that a person is made up of heart, mind and body (*sem, yi, lu*).

There is also an aspect of a person that cannot be seen that we call *namshe*. When a person dies, his body will perish, but his *namshe* will continue to exist.

Question 3: Where does the spirit of a human come from?

Answer: When a person is born, he or she has a body and a *namshe*. This *namshe* is not a new being, but has existed in a previous life who

enters the newborn and continues to live. Therefore, the *namshe* that is now within the new born baby, has lived on this earth previously in the past.

Topic 2: The creation of humans

Question 1: What do you know about the creation of mankind?

Answer: I do not know that we were created. I never knew if there was a creator of mankind or not.

Question 2a: How did mankind come into being?

Answer: We were not taught that mankind was created. Tibetans come from the marriage between a kind-hearted monkey and a cave-dwelling demoness. Their children looked like monkeys, who over time become more like human. This happened in a small town called Tsedang in Tibet. This is the origin of us, Tibetan people.

Question 2b: Tibetan people are not the only people in this world. Where did other races of people come from?

Answer: We do not know, we are not taught.

Question 3: What do you believe in, about our body and our spirit as mankind?

Answer: We know that the body grows from a new born baby into adulthood. Our body then naturally grows old, dies, and decays. As I mentioned before, we believe that a person has a *namshe* that lives on either as another new born baby, as an animal, or as other beings. In this way, the *namshe* of a person continues to live on in another form of living thing.

If for some reason the *namshe* could not find another host to enter, it will become a destructive *namshe* that causes harm and havoc to other people.

Topic 3: The end of human life

(Psalms 104:29 “When you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.)

Question 1: What do you think about the spirit leaving the body?

Answer: As already mentioned before, the *namshe* leaves the body when the person dies. Whether it is taken away or leaves the body on its own accord we do not know.

Question 2: Where does the spirit go to, when a person dies?

Answer: The *namshe* will first go to what is known as *nyelwa* (*hell*). In *nyelwa* it will be determined by the king of *nyelwa* according to the way the person lived whilst on earth. If the person had accumulated enough good deeds, the *namshe* will be reborn in one of the high realms. However, if the person had accumulated enough bad deeds, then the *namshe* will be reborn in one of the lower realms.

Question 3: Why does the spirit leave the body?

Answer: Because death caused a separation between the body and the *namshe*.

Question 4: What do you think about death?

Answer: Everyone must die one day. After we die, we will live again in the next life, called *tse chima*. The next life we live is determined by what we do in this lifetime. This is the reason why many Tibetans seek every opportunity to perform religious practices, help other people, seek not to kill any living things, eat less meat, and eggs. All these deeds will determine how and where we will live in the next lifetime.

Question 5: What is the relationship between the living and those who have died?

Answer: In a normal situation, those who are alive have no relationship with the dead. However sometimes when a family member dies, the *namshe* does not leave immediately. This *namshe* could cause harm to a family member or the surrounding people.

Question 6: What do you think of eternity?

Answer: For us, eternity is something that never change. Everything around us continues to change over time. The only thing that does not change is emptiness such as space. Therefore, we consider eternity, as an empty space that never change.

Note: From this short insight into the core beliefs of our Tibetan friends, how do we introduce the Gospel to them?

Summary:

1. My Tibetan friends do not know the origin of all creation and they do not know how all this creation will end. (Genesis 1 and 2)

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. – Colossians 1:16

2. My Tibetan friends are looking for freedom from the six kinds of suffering of beings.
3. *Karma* determines the state of my Tibetan friends' life in this world.
4. My Tibetan friends consider humans and animals within the same category. Having a heart, mind, and *namshe*.
5. My Tibetan friends do not differentiate between humans and animals regarding the purpose of being created.

In closing

We have had the pleasure of having over 40 close Tibetan friends. From all of them, we have not yet met one friend who has hope of being able to reach *sang gye* (Nirvana). Whilst in Christianity, the Word of God gives us assurance to know that we indeed **have** eternal life.

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

1 John 5:13

Contact Information

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