



Society as Possibility: On the Semantic Range of the Tibetan Term *Sipa*

by HOLLY GAYLEY

TIBET HAS BEEN CREDITED as a repository of ancient wisdom, even as its political and social systems prior to 1950 have been viewed more ambiguously. The three-century rule under the auspices of successive Dalai Lamas has been condemned by some as an oppressive feudal theocracy and idealized by others as a Shangri-la ruled by a benevolent “god-king.”¹ What vision of society is captured in usages of the Tibetan term *sipa*, which can mean both “society” and “possibility,” and how has this been reimagined in recent decades? One avenue to pursue such a question would be to look at the deployment of this term and its implications as the Tibetan government in exile has transitioned to democracy.² Instead, I am interested in charting a different type of innovation, one in which the Tibetan Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa and his son and lineage heir Sakyong Mipham have probed the valences of the term *sipa* and fashioned a fresh vision for contemporary society.

Under the banner of Shambhala, Chögyam Trungpa coined the term “enlightened society” (*mi'i srid pa bzang po*) to capture a distinctive approach to combining spiritual and mundane pursuits. This approach seeks to integrate the practice of meditation into the kitchen-sink challenges of daily life and a concern for the state of the world today, socially and ecologically. This vision is modernist to the extent that it locates the sacred within the immanent details of ordinary life and does not advocate renouncing the world in the quest for enlightenment. At the same time, it attempts to reverse the prevailing tendencies to value quantity over quality, efficiency over aesthetics, and profit over

integrity, asserting instead what Chögyam Trungpa called “modern society with medieval dignity.”³

The new motto of Shambhala, “making enlightened society possible,” contains a pun on the Tibetan term, *sipa* (pronounced “see-pa,” transliterated *srid pa*).⁴ Given that *sipa* can mean both “society” and “possibility,” this motto suggests a certain perspective on society. Sometimes we think of society as a fixed structure in which individuals move between positions, like a board game or systems diagram. In the Shambhala view, society is an emergent phenomenon, based on causes and conditions, but also open to improvisation and unforeseen opportunities. What can one learn about the Shambhala view of society through an exploration of the term *sipa*? Such an exploration promises to illuminate the nuances in how the two lineage holders of Shambhala, Chögyam Trungpa and Sakyong Mipham, have deployed this term and characterized the social vision of Shambhala as a synthesis of the sacred and secular.

In Tibetan, the term *sipa* has a wide semantic range. It can refer to the cosmos or temporal order, the worldly or secular domain, and mundane existence as a whole. For example, *sipa* is the word for “existence” in the *bhavacakra* or “wheel of existence” (*srid pa'i khor lo*), commonly depicted in murals at Buddhist monasteries across the Tibetan plateau as an enormous wheel, representing *samsāra* and depicting the six realms of Buddhist cosmology. In this sense, for Tibetans, *sipa* stands for *samsāra* itself, the round of rebirth governed by karma and characterized by suffering. However, the term has a still broader application; *sipa* can also refer to politics or society. One of its main usages in Tibet is contained in the phrase, *chösi zungdrel* (*chos srid zung 'brel*), which refers to the union of religion and politics, or alternatively the integration of the spiritual and temporal orders, i.e., the sacred and secular.⁵ This phrase is essential to understanding the Tibetan ideal of Buddhist polity and shares much with the widespread Buddhist paradigm of governance by a righteous king, *dharmarāja*, or “wheel-turning” emperor, *cakravartin*.

The union of religion and politics is a long-standing ideal in Tibet, epitomized in the rule of the Dalai Lamas from 1642 to 1951. During this period, each successive Dalai Lama served as both the political head of state—though his regents often ruled on his behalf—and as a religious icon, the emanation of the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara. Tibetans also harken to the imperial period of the seventh to ninth centuries, when the Tibetan empire dominated vast

tracts of central Asia, as embodying the ideal of *chösi zungdrel*. Despite the violent conquests required to forge an empire, Songtsen Gampo is memorialized in Tibetan histories for his role in introducing Buddhism into Tibet. Later in the imperial line, Trisong Detsen sponsored the massive project of translating Buddhist canonical texts into Tibetan. For this reason, Tibetans have regarded them as *dharmarājas* and emanations of *bodhisattvas*.

When the term *sipa* is used in the Shambhala tradition, it refers to society rather than politics. Chögyam Trungpa coined the term “enlightened society” as a defining feature and aim of the Shambhala path. This aim draws its inspiration from the legend of Shambhala, a mythical kingdom that may have existed in Central Asia in which all of the citizens were said to attain enlightenment. According to this legend, Shambhala’s first king Sucandra, or Dawa Zangpo in Tibetan, received the *Kālacakra* teachings from the Buddha himself and propagated them to the citizens of his kingdom.⁶ At some point, with their collective enlightenment, Shambhala is said to have disappeared from the world of ordinary perception and to have become a pure land. In line with this legend, Tibetan literature contains guidebooks to Shambhala that chart a visionary pilgrimage to this ethereal destination.

Even so, the Shambhala tradition, as inaugurated by Chögyam Trungpa in the 1970s, advocates neither a mystical journey to an ethereal destination nor an escape from the mundane. Quite the contrary, the aim is to create an enlightened society here and now—in this very world and in one’s own domestic situation.⁷ In his main public exposition on the Shambhala path, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, Chögyam Trungpa states:

To begin with, you have to look at your ordinary domestic reality: your knives, your forks, your plates, your telephone, your dishwasher, and your towels—ordinary things. There is nothing mystical or extraordinary about them, but if there is no connection with ordinary everyday situations, if you don’t examine your mundane life, then you will never find any humor or dignity, or, ultimately, any reality.

The way you comb your hair, the way you dress, the way you wash your dishes—all of those activities are an extension of sanity; they are a way of connecting with reality. A fork is a fork, of course. It is a simple implement of eating. But at the same time, the extension of your sanity and your dignity may depend on how you use your fork. Very simply, Sham-

bhala vision is trying to provoke you to understand how you live, your relationship with ordinary life.⁸

With its attention to the mundane features of everyday life, the Shambhala tradition promotes a householder path that is distinct from the early Buddhist emphasis on renunciation—wandering homeless and relying on alms—in order to transcend samsāra and attain *nirvāna*. Instead, the idea is to use the mundane occurrences and challenges of everyday life to awaken in the world and develop a sanity that entails a direct relationship with one's present reality.

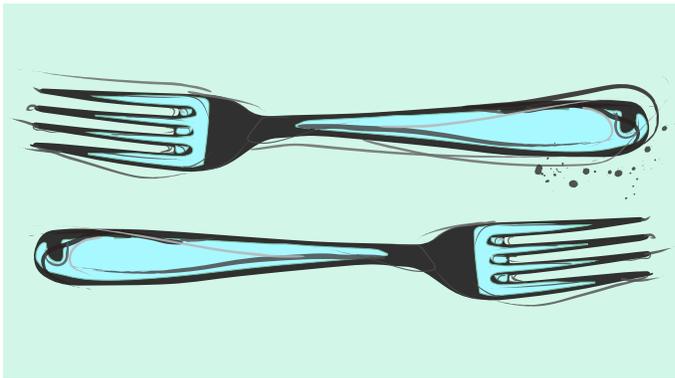


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Alicia Brown

The Shambhala path draws on the tantric collapse of the distinction between samsāra and nirvāna. Rather than renouncing the world, the tantric practitioner seeks to discover the sacred in the mundane, captured in the term “sacred outlook” or “pure perception” (*dag snang*). Sacred outlook involves not discriminating between pure and impure and thereby engaging in

worldly—sometimes antinomian—activities as integral to tantric practice. Recall the tales of tantric heroes such as Tilopa, who ground sesame seeds in order to extract the essence, i.e., the sesame oil, a metaphor for one's true nature.⁹ In Tibet, the non-monastic tantric vocation of the *yogin* or *ngakpa* (*sngags pa*) embodies this approach to the Buddhist path. Ngakpas keep their hair long, rather than shaved as monks do, wear white robes rather than saffron ones, and often marry and have families; they are householder yogins.

One can only make sense of the Shambhala vision of society as synthesizing the sacred and secular within the context of sacred outlook from Buddhist tantra (also called the *vajrayāna* or “indestructible vehicle”). As one Shambhala website puts it, “The Shambhala teachings bring the sacred outlook of the vajrayāna path of individual transformation into the 21st century western secular households.”¹⁰ This speaks to the integration of sacred outlook into the Shambhala teachings, particularly in relation to the household, and echoes the importance that Chögyam Trungpa placed on “ordinary domestic reality,” the kitchen-sink level of concerns and challenges of everyday life.

Nonetheless, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* expresses sacred outlook in secular terms. There Chögyam Trungpa refers to

Shambhala as a “secular tradition rather than a religious one” offering “the possibility of uplifting our personal existence and that of others without the help of any religious outlook.”¹¹ At the same time, he proposes a “sacred world... which exists spontaneously, naturally in the phenomenal world,” akin to the tantric view of sacred outlook. In the Shambhala articulation of “sacred world,” the sacred is immanent in the ordinary world—in everyday sights and sounds—and accessible through the senses. Neither rejected as a source of temptation nor indulged merely as a source of pleasure, the senses here serve as the gateway to reality and sacredness. In other words, the sacred—naturalized and thereby dislodged from any specific religion—is to be found in the secular rather than set apart from it, recognizing “the potential for sacredness in every situation.”¹²

More than a decade ago, Sakyong Mipham made a shift in the presentation of Shambhala as a secular tradition by introducing the name, Shambhala Buddhism. In introducing this name, he underscored the degree to which the Buddhist path of self-cultivation and the Shambhala emphasis on enlightened society work in tandem. Here we find echoes of *chösi zungdrel*. In a talk titled, “Shambhala Buddhism” and reprinted on Shambhala.org, Sakyong Mipham affirmed the “view that spiritual and secular activities are inseparable” and hence the imperative to synthesize the sacred and secular, or the spiritual and temporal aspects of daily life.¹³ This view is the impetus for the “In Everyday Life” series, which has become integral to the Shambhala core curriculum in recent years and encourages applying the principles of meditation and the Shambhala teachings to the arenas of household, livelihood, and community. As a corollary, in his recent publication, *The Shambhala Principle*, Sakyong Mipham emphasizes “the inseparability of personal and social transformation” and elsewhere introduces the term “social enlightenment.”¹⁴

At first, a vision of society that combines the sacred and secular may appear to be an oxymoron. After all, a secular society is one in which religion has been relegated to the private sphere outside the domain of civic life and especially politics, hence the separation of church and state. So how could the secular, which by this definition excludes religion, be conjoined with the sacred? Of course, the process of secularization has been more complicated. Not only has the modern nation state produced its own kind of “civil religion” but also the secularization thesis—which imagined that the process of modernization would produce a decline in religious belief and practice—has been questioned

altogether, due to the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.¹⁵ Moreover, a medieval European conception of “secularization” had two different strains: one attempted to marginalize the religious by excluding it from the public secular sphere while the other aimed “to spiritualize the temporal and bring the religious life of perfection out of the monasteries into the secular world.”¹⁶ In the latter version, secularizing meant to collapse boundaries between the religious and secular, encouraging monastics to break out of the cloister and engage in the world. The impulse to collapse boundaries, such that spiritual practice comes to infuse ordinary life, resonates with the Shambhala notion of synthesizing the sacred and secular.

With this background in place, let us return to the question of society as possibility. For this, I would like to examine the opening lines of *The Letter of the Black Ashe* (*A shad nag po'i yig ge*), one of the root texts of the Shambhala teachings.¹⁷ In these lines, which appear in *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, Chögyam Trungpa uses the term *sipa* twice, first to describe the field of possibility, captured in the image of a “cosmic mirror” (*srid pa'i me long*), and second to depict the arising of human society (*mi yi srid pa*) out of that.¹⁸ These lines read:

From the great cosmic mirror
Without beginning and without end,
Human society became manifest.
At that time liberation and confusion arose.¹⁹

This is the source for the Shambhala view of the emergent nature of society. Chögyam Trungpa defines the cosmic mirror as the unconditioned ground of existence from which conditioned phenomena arise.²⁰ Like a mirror, it reflects whatever arises without bias. As in the tantric teachings on “co-emergence” (*lhan gcig skyes pa*), the possibility for liberation or confusion arises simultaneously in each moment. But in this case the text refers to the liberation or confusion of a society rather than an individual. As the passage continues, out of that ground of possibility arises humanity as a collective, which either goes the way of liberation to create a dignified human society or goes the way of confusion to create a degraded society.

Subsequent lines of this text portray these divergent pathways. On the one hand is a fear-based society of cowards hiding in jungles and caves, feeding on one another's flesh, roiling in hatred and lust. And on the other is a loving and generous society, free of strife, comprised of confident warriors inhabiting highland mountains and plentiful plains

of wheat and barley. These lines create a poetic contrast in stark, black-and-white terms between possible outlooks and outcomes for a society. However, this is not intended to be an origin account or creation myth. Given the emphasis on working with fear to develop bravery and confidence in *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, it makes more sense to read this as a metaphor for a choice made moment by moment. In the world where shades of gray present themselves continually, there is a choice each moment to act with openness and a concern for others or with fear and an instinct to protect one's own interests first and foremost.

Of course, this begs the question: How do the choices of individuals create a collective outcome? There may be no easy answer to this. Neither Chögyam Trungpa nor Sakyong Mipham has articulated a notion of collective karma to my knowledge. Yet, in vividly contrasting the arising of a collective based on fear with one characterized by confidence, the Shambhala teachings depict human society as contingent, arising and taking shape according to the disposition and actions of its members. It implies that society is co-created as a dynamic series of interactions. Though conditioned by cultural norms, status differentials, and authoritative discourses, interactions are nonetheless uncertain, open-ended improvisations that create the contours of one's relationships and communities.

To further unpack the Shambhala vision of society as emergent and contingent—arising from a field of possibility—it is helpful to consider how Sakyong Mipham has recently defined society. In *The Shambhala Principle*, he underscores that society is based on interactions and relationships between individuals, starting with two people—“just you and me” as he puts it, quoting his father—and expanding into larger networks from there. He states, “Even in a large city, the relationships are still between two individuals.”²¹ Approaching society from the micro-level of daily interactions rather than the macro-level of institutions makes it easier to imagine the importance of an individual's choice on the outlook and outcome of a collective, such as a family dynamic or office politics. To this effect, Sakyong Mipham states, “with the simplest daily interactions, we can create enlightened society.”²²

Yet, since those relationships expand into larger networks, Sakyong Mipham suggests that the effect of such daily interactions may be greater:

Most of us do not consider a conversation with another as creating culture, or affecting the world much at all. Yet our

seemingly minor exchanges have the power to gain momentum and begin to shift the social and environmental dynamics of our planet. The world is made up of millions and billions of “just you and me” interactions, which include our relationship with everything—people, the environment, even our teacup. These interactions create energetic networks, expanding exponentially.²³

Without defining explicitly how the micro-level and macro-level meet, the Shambhala vision of society seeks to empower individuals and communities in shaping our world. It offers a distinctive understanding of social transformation, moment by moment. What we think, say, and do impacts our surroundings, and similarly our surroundings—particularly dominant social values and media representations—impact what we think, say, and do. This is no doubt why personal and social transformation go hand in hand in Sakyong Mipham’s presentation.

The notion that society is created one interaction and relationship at a time makes room for improvisation and a sense of possibility. Whether on the level of personal support, social service, or collective action, this is an affirmation that one can make a difference. Otherwise, the social, economic, and environmental problems facing the world can seem daunting and intractable. Perhaps this is why Sakyong Mipham coined the slogan, “making the impossible possible,” suggesting that however discouraging the current state of affairs appears to be, it is still possible to reverse course. He expresses society as an emergent field of possibility: “Let us now re-empower the word *society* so that every time we have a conversation, it is an expression of possibility.”²⁴

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NOTES

1. The former view is typical of the Chinese state in their white papers on Tibet (<http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/tibet/>). On the latter view, see Donald Lopez, *Prisoners of Shambhala: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).
2. This approach has already effectively been pursued by Emmi Okada in her presentation, “Constructing Tibetan Secularism in Exile” at the 13th Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia during July 21–27, 2013.
3. On modernism, religious and otherwise, see Charles Jones, “Transitions in the Practice and Defense of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism” in *Buddhism in the Modern World: Adaptations of an Ancient Tradition*, edited by Steven Heine and Charles Prebish (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). The phrase, “modern society with medieval dignity,” appears in the 1979 Kalapa Assembly Transcripts (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Vajradhatu Publications, 1996).
4. This motto can currently be found on Shambhala.org and Shambhala Center websites.
5. See contributions by David Ruegg and Ishihama Yumiko to *The Relationship Between Religion and State (chos srid zung ’brel) in Traditional Tibet*, edited by Chrisoph Cüppers (Lumbini, Nepal: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2004).
6. For a discussion of the connection between the legend of Shambhala and the *Kālacakra Tantra*, see Nick Trautz, “Shambhala in the Kalacakra Tantra” on *The Shambhala Times*. Available at: <http://shambhalatimes.org/2010/08/08/shambhala-in-the-kalachakra-tantra>.
7. In this way, the Shambhala emphasis on “enlightened society” is comparable to the efforts by Chinese modernists like Taixu to create a pure land on earth (Jones 2003).
8. Chögyam Trungpa, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (Boston: Shambhala Publications: 1984), 32–3.
9. Tilopa’s story includes other more antinomian aspects in Kagyu accounts of his life, traced to a short biography attributed to Marpa the Translator. See, for example, a retelling by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, delivered at Karma Triyana Dharmachakra in March 1986. Available at: <http://www.kagyu.org/kagyulineage/lineage/kag02.php>. For other stories of the tantric *siddhas* or “accomplished ones,” see James Robinson, *Buddhas Lions: The Lives of the Eighty-Four Siddhas* (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1979).
10. This phrase appears in the description for a program on “The Sacred and Secular” with the Dorje Loppön, Lodrö Dorje. Available at: <http://boston.shambhala.org/program-details/?id=7610>.
11. Chögyam Trungpa, *Sacred Path*, 102 and 27, respectively. Indeed, Shambhala is secular to the extent that it offers a path of personal transformation through the Shambhala Training Levels, which are open to people of any religious background. Advance programs and practices, however, presume Buddhist commitments such as the refuge and bodhisattva vows.
12. *Ibid.*, 126.
13. This quote comes from a talk that Sakyong Mipham gave at a Kalapa Assembly on May 23, 2000. Available at: http://www.shambhala.org/teachers/sakyong_talk01.php.
14. Sakyong Mipham, *The Shambhala Principle* (New York: Harmony Books, 2013), x. The term “social enlightenment” appears in “The Letter of the Morning Sun,” composed in Halifax in Autumn 2010.
15. For a reappraisal of the secularization thesis, see *Rethinking Secularism*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Mark Jurgensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

- 2011). On civil religion, see Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96/1 (1967): 1–21.
16. José Casanova, "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularism" in Calhoun, Jurgensmeyer and VanAntwerpen 2011: 56.
 17. These root texts are considered to be *terma* (*gter ma*), which literally means "treasure" and refers to the revelations of a great master, typically but not always within the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. For an overview of terma, see Tulku Thondup, *The Hidden Teachings of Tibet* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997).
 18. Human society is spelled *mi yi srid pa* in this verse as part of the Tibetan convention of extending or condensing the number of syllables in any given line to fit the poetic meter.
 19. Chögyam Trungpa, *Sacred Path*, 23. The Tibetan is available on the adjacent page.
 20. *Ibid.*, 100 ff.
 21. Sakyong Mipham, *Shambhala Principle*, 88.
 22. *Ibid.*, 93.
 23. *Ibid.*, 92.
 24. *Ibid.*, 94.