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The Sorrowful Fates of Rebirth: Ippolito Desideri Encounters Tibetan Sacred Art

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(English version revised by Francis Tiso)*

ABSTRACT

A lesser, but for that reason not to be neglected, aspect of the thought of Ippolito Desideri is his perception and interpretation of Tibetan artistic phenomenology (including architecture),¹ a lucid perception within the limits of his own formation, but certainly a passionate one, as in the case of all the other fields to which he applied himself. In the *Report* of Father Ippolito significant and admirable descriptions of Tibetan art are not lacking as also are some of the most noteworthy sites: Leh, Sakya, Saka Dzung, Shigatse, naturally Lhasa and its monuments (Ramoche, Potala), as well as the area around the great monastery of Sera. Father Ippolito Desideri referred to himself as “the lama Ippolito, whose head is white as a star” (Tibetan: *mGo.sKar.Gyi.bLa.Ma.I.Po.li.do*; in *Notizie Istoriche del Thibet, e Memorie de' viaggi, e missione ivi fatta dal P. Ippolito Desideri della Compagnia di Gesù Dal medesimo scritte, e dedicate 1712–1733*), more likely alluding to the clarity of his own vision than to the color of his hair. His vision not only penetrated—at least intellectually if not experientially—the ultimate modality of the existence of reality (*śūnyatā*), that is, the concept that stands as the foundation of the immense theoretical-speculative edifice of Buddhism, as well as the totality of the dimensions proper to Tibetan civilization, not the least of which is art. The acuteness of his gaze will take him not only to bestowing on Europe one of the first credible accounts of Tibetan art, but also to criticize—and with good reason—several descriptions of the sacred content of Himalayan art offered by authors preceding him (notably Athanasius Kircher and António de Andrade).

KEYWORDS: Ippolito Desideri, Tibetan Buddhist *Vajrayāna*, Tibetan Buddhist sacred art, iconology, Buddhist epistemology, Buddhist soteriology, philosophy of religion, intercultural religious dialogue.

*Labor omnia vicit improbus,
et duris urgens in rebus egestas.*

Every difficulty is conquered by hard labor and by
that need which presses onward under hard vicissitudes.

—PUBLIUS VERGILIUS MARO, *Georgica*, I, 145–146.

INDO-TIBETAN SACRED ART

In the *vajrayāna* tradition of the *mahāyāna*, Buddhist attainment and the path toward its realization can be described by means of the geometrical formality of an architectural site; the *maṇḍala* comes to be proposed as an ideal representation in graphic form of the relationships that exist between the universe and the human mind, the “psycho-cosmogram,” to use the now classic definition formulated by Giuseppe Tucci, that illustrates the subtle connections between the human microcosm and the universe. The *maṇḍala* can also be defined as the world of being, over which truth presides (Figure 1); the *bhavacakra*² (a kind of mental map of the concepts placed at the basis of Buddhist psycho-cosmology, made graphic with small images set in place in a circular manner that represents the “wheel of rebirths”) is set against the “world of becoming,” *saṃsāra* devoured by forgetfulness, represented by Yama, the god of the dead in Buddhist cosmology, who holds all within his jaws as a sign of immanent sorrow (Figure 2).

Ippolito Desideri describes the *bhavacakra* in his own writings as

a symbol or figure employed as a material sign of which the Tibetans make use in order to teach, one of the principal points of their false belief system. [. . .] The symbol or if we wish to say, the figure, or more appropriately of the accentuated hieroglyphic which the Tibetans use, is almost the same as that which can be seen as the frontispiece of a small work of Father Pietro Pinamonti³ of the Society titled *Inferno Opened*. These images therefore present the head of a horrible monster with its mouth fearfully wide open. Within that mouth in a wheel divided into six compartments are represented the six states of existence of the living, that is, three that are the reward of virtue, and three of damnation and the chastisement of sin [. . .]. In accordance with what they say, the hieroglyphic is meant to express in that horrible head and fearful mouth of the monster the work of the living, and in the wheel with its six compartments and six states in which the living find themselves, is meant to express the fruits that living beings produce by their works, with their own consequences. Such a symbol and the explanation given it by the Tibetans are the direct opposite and formally excluded from the notion of Fate.⁴

From the *bhavacakra* emerges, in a form that is intentionally didactic thanks to the evident capacity of this art form to make extremely complex concepts graphic, including the description of Buddhist cosmology and the introduction of Buddhist soteriology, as well as, on a more anthropological level, the centrality of the “precious human

Figure 1. *Vajradhātumaṇḍala*, painting on cloth; Tibet or Nepal, nineteenth century. MuCiv-MAO inv. 951.

rebirth.” *Mahāyāna* Buddhism (which includes Indo-Tibetan *vajrayāna* tantrism) has as its measure of sanctity in the figure of the *bodhisattva* (the “being of reawakening”), who, motivated by altruism, continues to reincarnate (in the sense of conscious rebirth) until all beings have been saved. The *bodhisattva* drives himself toward attaining reawakening (*bodhi*) starting with the progressive destruction of the “dissonant emotions” (*kleśa*) that constrain transmigrating beings toward rebirth, unconsciously

Figure 2. *Bhavacakra*, painting on cloth; Nepal, nineteenth to twentieth century.

and without the possibility of a personal choice, into the existential environments that constitute the cycle of existences: hells (Figures 3, 4), hungry ghosts, animals, human beings, titans, and worldly divinities. These are six states of being contextualized as onto-perceptive, not as a result of free will or by a creator deity, or, as Desideri sharply observed, by Fate, but rather by *karma*, the implacable law of cause and effect to which the study and practice of *dharmā* (the teachings of the Buddha) are counterpoised as the uniquely efficacious antidote.

At this point it is necessary to offer, to the extent possible, those elements that allow us to assist the reader in beginning to appreciate Father Ippolito's own aesthetic reflection, based on a clear perception that was translated into a sincere appreciation for Tibetan art; it is therefore opportune to introduce at least the basic ideological content of this artistic activity, beginning with a rapid glance at that of India, which even today, as in previous centuries, remains the cultural high point of reference for Tibetan culture. To approach these inseparable cultural activities in a convincing way, it is useful to summarize briefly its deep motivations, recalling that the many and varied religious ideologies present for millennia on the subcontinent, have understood religious art in the manner of an *ancilla theologiae* ("servant of theology").

First of all, both the aesthetics and the metaphysics that inform all Indian art, essentially orbit the concept of *rāsa* ("emotion," "flavor," "color"). The manuals called *Śilpaśāstra*, employed by *śilpin* or *rūpakāra* ("those who create forms," i.e., artists), proceed from the presupposition that once one succeeds in organizing the material forms so as to efficiently determine a *rāsa*, the artist becomes a vehicle for the divine. He, communicating the invisible contents of the divine by means of sensory forms, should engender in human beings, beneficiaries of the artistic achievement and above all of the *rāsa* evoked by it, a pause in the otherwise ineluctable sequence of causes

Figure 3. The hells: Sanskrit, *naraka*; Tibetan *dMyal.Ba* (detail of Figure 2).

Figure 4. The jaws of damnation; the depiction of the entry to hell often represented in European Christian art as the wide-open mouth of an enormous monster, an image that is commonly used in works of art showing the Last Judgment and hell from the end of the Middle Ages, often used during the Renaissance and beyond (e.g., the *Book of Hours* of Catherine of Cleves, ca. 1440). This disquieting representation was frequently brought into high relief in popular polemical publications against the Protestant reform, in which the figures of the souls of the damned would have been shown being swallowed by the monstrous mouth.

and effects (made real by *karma*) that do not allow ordinary beings to recognize their deeper nature, which is immutable and eternal. Art is therefore understood as a very privileged vehicle of purification, transformation, and in the end salvation from the world contaminated by impure rebirths (*saṃsāra*). The sacred image, as expressed in its various material supports as well as in architecture, is, in India as for Orthodox Christian art, the true “royal portal,” the icon through which the divine gazes from the golden light of the absolute to extend itself compassionately toward the world of human beings, to teach them the path of self-knowledge by means of the subtle interplay of analogy between that which is visible and temporal and that which is invisible and eternal.⁵

And now we enter more directly into our topic: the images of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, considered as iconograms, that is, aggregates of powerful symbolism organized according to schemes that have been established on the basis of the canonical literature. Even though they resemble the human form, the bodies of the buddhas are in reality symbols that offer moral inspiration and sustain contemplation. The art of *vajrayāna* (Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tantrism) moreover takes on a ritual character, expressing itself as a liturgy of the transformation of the human into the divine. Among the effects of the initiate’s liturgical practice is the clear cognition of oneself as a divinity, taking on the corresponding “divine pride” (*devamāna*). In such a process, ordinary appearances, visible as they are to the eyes of flesh, are not negated; rather, while not allowing ordinary phenomena to appear to mental consciousness, the practice involves causing the divine appearances to shine more brilliantly.⁶

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISCOURSE AND THE PSYCHO-COSMOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Phenomena belonging to the particularly subtle categories of consciousness are interpreted in the wisdom traditions of India⁷ as being independent of the neuro-cerebral structure. In saying this, however, it is not to be understood—above all in Buddhism (or more correctly, “the doctrine of re-awakening”)—as an affirmation that would indicate a phenomenon defined as an unchanging soul, independent of causality, components, and conditions. The noetic act is conceived as a multifaceted matrix of events in relationships articulated among themselves as to function and meaning. Some interior events in humans are disclosed in effect as the results of material causes, that is from the brain, but at the extreme opposite of this variegated spectrum there are other phenomena that are considered, on the contrary, to possess characteristics that are not directly reducible to the body.

In the language that is developing within Buddhadharma at this time in its already worldwide dissemination, the concept of rebirth is being distinguished from that of reincarnation. For rebirth one is to understand the unconscious becoming (*bhavati*) activated and propelled by karma, which is in fact the effect of actions performed lifetime after lifetime. Rebirth refers to the majority of beings who experience *saṃsāra*, the cycle of rebirths that the term suffering connotes; reincarnation,

on the other hand, refers to those few who, having stabilized an exceptional degree of control over their mental continuum, succeed in consciously directing this flow of consciousness, even as it undergoes modifications. Usually this is the case with masters (Skt. *guru*, Tibetan *bla.ma*) and it is implicitly understood that around them there are disciples. Feeling that the end of the physical body is drawing near, the guru, motivated by compassion for the disciples who still need a spiritual guide, can then choose to call together the circle of intimate disciples around himself to give them more or less precise indications with regard to the place and time of his next reincarnation, to allow them to retrace the new body at the end of a complex selection procedure that involves the recognition of objects owned by the previous incarnation, along with the use of oracles. The case of the reincarnation of the best known (to the West) reincarnation is surely that of Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet, who is the fourteenth in a series of reincarnated masters that, after six centuries, has reached our contemporary epoch. Other than the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan tradition numbers other reincarnated adepts (Tibetan *sprul.sku*) belonging to various lineages of spiritual transmission (Skt. *sampradāya*) by which, as in a wondrous diamond, the doctrine of Buddha transplanted onto the roof of the world is decorated.

Often the question is raised in the West with regard to the impossibility of a rational explanation for several spiritual traditions and the fact, pure and simple, of rebirth. The fundamental point is that the substantial cause of a mind can only be a phenomenon characterized by all the properties of consciousness, that is, another homologous mind existing in the immediately preceding moment. Thus, one turns all the way to conception: the germ cells of the father and the mother (substantial cause of the body) on the one hand, and on the other, consciousness, endowed with heteronomous functions with regard to any of the material causes, irreducible to physical aspects. In the theistic religions, or in those spiritual traditions that hold to a creator deity, at this point one speaks of a vertical teleology, by which we are to understand that in the act of conception the substantial cause of the body becomes the "vessel" or support appropriate for receiving the personal soul (the *jīva*, in the case of the theistic schools of Hinduism) as a sort of luminous particle, a direct fragment of divinity, expressly and freely created in the image and likeness of God. The response of the spiritual traditions that do not necessarily take on a theistic position, among which in fact we can include Buddhaharma, is that this clear and conscious element, this specific consciousness, far from having been created by an external agent, derives from a preceding flux of moments of consciousness. The process proceeds, according to a vision of the world used more as a tool of research than as a dogmatic position. Within all existence (*bhava*) can be distinguished three spheres: the sphere of desire (*kāmadhātu*), the sphere of form (*rūpadhātu*), and the sphere without form (*arūpya*). These three environments, forming the triple world (*triloka*), are in reality connected because they fall under the sway of the laws of cause and effect, it not being in any way possible to proceed within them to the perfect attainment of supreme good, which in this context is *nirvāṇa*. All the impermanent beings that experience conditioned existence are thus to be found

in one of these three spheres, going through them lifetime after lifetime, and this continuous recycling from one sphere to another ought to explain among other things the exchange of the numerous sentient beings present in this world. The majority of transmigrating beings are not yet endowed with a sufficient degree of spiritual maturity to be able to use the process of death to identify oneself with *śūnyatā*, the ultimate modality of the existence of reality. Between the phases of death and of rebirth the conception of the *vajrayāna* (the esoteric, liturgical, and initiatic vehicle of *mahāyāna* Buddhism) places an intermediate existential condition called the *antarābhava* in Sanskrit and the *Bar.Do* in Tibetan.⁸ This is a state in which consciousness makes use of an extremely subtle body, call the *Bar.Do* body, composed of extremely rarefied materials as a kind of vector for traveling from one plane to another of the many universes awaiting the ripening of the circumstantial conditions favorable to one or another karmic unfolding. The characteristics of the intermediate state, from the beginning of the dying process down to the analytic description of the means of conception, have been given ample space in the religious literature of Tibet.

Well known in the West is the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, given its first European edition by W. Y. Evans Wentz in 1927, following the only apparently relevant parallel in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. In reality, the book is a series of texts organizing the instructions by topic that go to complete the rituals to execute, or to have recited, on the occasion of a person's death. Often the celebrant, whether monk or layperson, whispers in the ear of the dying or dead person counsel that serves to reawaken in the consciousness, not yet completely separated from the body (even beyond the clinical confirmations of bodily death), the memory of the spiritual teachings that had been received during one's lifetime; for this reason the collection of texts to accompany the dying person are defined with the collective term *Bardo Tödröl*, or liberation by means of hearing during the intermediate state.

The study of this literature discloses an extremely acute memory-aid that analyzes each and every phenomenon, however small, related to death and to the signs that accompany or make death known. The entire process of extinction should be experienced by the tantric adept (*sādhaka*) in the course of the formal sessions of one's own daily meditation, of which they are a fundamental and integrative part. As can easily be discerned, only an extremely mature personality can sustain the psychic impact of exposing oneself to such a discipline without running the risk of possibly suffering from character disorders. On the other hand, only the one who has begun to take hold of the subtle psychic processes may experience those unsettling sensations and use the corresponding visions to accelerate one's own theosis (*θεωσις*),⁹ the transmutation of the ordinary being into a divinity that has permeated the nature of the material elements of one's own body with spiritual ecstasy, reawakening it to an understanding that embraces the entire universe. The *sādhaka* will appreciate every instant as being part of an immense energy configuration, a wonderful vibratory field created by the force of an encounter between the beatific principle and nature, pervaded by a ceaseless ecstasy in which every dualistic conflict has been resolved, forever.

Risking oneself along the path toward the realization of the objective we have in an ungraceful way attempted to describe is as just and opportune as placing one's full trust in the resources of humankind—it is a much more well-founded attitude than any restricted, and flatly utilitarian vision of existence. The present generation, which, up to a few years ago, according to most scholars of the philosophy of religion, ought to have revealed itself as the most resistant to non-rational life options, instead is taking the risk, whether as a result of a lack of existential grounding or a lack of speculative ability, even going as far as embracing fundamentalism and/or religious integralism. It is to be noted, however, that Buddhadharma, a truly unique example of an a-theistic religion (assigning to the alpha the meaning of “cutting off beforehand” and thus not meaning mere negation) has recourse to a metalanguage that constantly alludes to the need to transcend every kind of conditioning, including religious. The *dharmā* is none other than the raft (a metaphor already evoked in the early Buddhist canon) that is useful only insofar as the pond has not yet been crossed, but that is heavy for those who would continue to drag it along even after having reached solid ground. By analogy, the works of piety prescribed on the beginner's level come to be superseded by a psycho-experimental praxis that can, under certain conditions, even transcend conventional morality. Thus, it was said by the “great adept” (*mahāsiddha*) Tilopa: “Do not adore the divinities! No more pilgrimages to the sacred sites of ritual ablutions! To adore the divinities is not liberation.”

Even the veneration of the Buddha, including the simulacra that represent him in art, should be considered part of the ways of *upāya*, the “intelligent means” that the altruistic reawakening mind employs, by way of sacred expedients, to urge on human beings toward salvation with all means possible. In a final synthesis, returning to the principal theme, Tibetan sacred art stamps the image with a vigorous mystical force, evoked by a contemplative practitioner so as to be efficaciously transmitted—with the smallest possible number of variations—to another contemplative mind. This art assumes moreover a ritual force, expressing itself as a liturgy of the transfiguration of the human into the divine, a kind of *theosis*.

CONCLUSION

In the *Report* of Father Ippolito (Petech 1955, V, VI, VII) significant and admirable descriptions of Tibetan art are not lacking (*ibid.*, VI, DR. 3:286–293), as also are some of the most noteworthy sites: Leh (*ibid.*, V:166), Sakya (*ibid.*, VI, DR. 2:21), Saka Dzong (*ibid.*, VI, DR. 2:18), Shigatse (*ibid.*, VI, DR. 2:212), naturally Lhasa (*ibid.*, VI, DR. 2:23–25, 26–27), and its monuments (Ramoche, *ibid.*, VI, DR. 2:26; Potala, *ibid.*, VI:27–28), as well as the area around the great monastery of Sera (*ibid.*, VI, DR. 2:29–30, 33).¹⁰

Father Ippolito Desideri referred to himself as “the lama Ippolito, whose head is white as a star,”¹¹ alluding more likely to the clarity of his own vision rather than to the color of his hair. His vision not only penetrated—at least intellectually if not experientially—the ultimate modality of the existence of reality (*śūnyatā*), that is, the

concept that stands as the foundation of the immense theoretical-speculative edifice of Buddhism,¹² as well as the totality of the dimensions proper to Tibetan civilization, not the least of which is art. The acuteness of his gaze will take him not only to bestowing on Europe one of the first credible accounts of Tibetan art, but also to criticize—and with good reason—several descriptions of the sacred content of Himalayan art offered by authors preceding him.¹³

NOTES

1. Lo Bue, 2015.
2. Skt. wheel of becoming; Tibetan wheel of life (*Srid.Pa'i. 'Khor.Lo*).
3. Giovanni Pietro Pinamonti (1632–1703), born in Pistoia, as Father Hippolytus was a Jesuit preacher, companion and collaborator of the confrere Paolo Segneri (1624–1694). The image, which is reproduced in Figure 4, on the front page of the first edition (*L'inferno aperto a cristiano perché non v'entri* [Parma: Pazzoni e Monti, 1693]), is cited by Desideri. The book had many Italian editions and English translations.
4. “[. . .] un simbolo o figura di cui si servono i Thibetani per far conoscere con un segno materiale uno de' punti principali della loro falsa credenza [. . .]. Il simbolo o vogliam dir figura, o per parlar più propriamente, il geroglifico accennato di cui si servono i Thibetani, è quasi il medesimo che quello che tra di noi corre impresso nel frontispizio d'una piccola operetta del P. Pietro Pinamonti della nostra Compagnia intitolato l'Inferno aperto. Rappresentano dunque una gran testa d'un mostro orribile con la bocca spaventevolmente spalancata. Dentro una tal bocca in una rota divisa in sei spartimenti rappresentano i sei stati de' viventi, cioè tre di premio della virtù e tre di dannazione e castigo de' peccati [. . .]. Conforme a ciò vengono a dire che il geroglifico da loro proposto vien a esprimere nell'orribil testa e spaventevol bocca del mostro l'opera de' viventi, e nella rota e nei suoi sei spartimenti e sei stati in cui si trovano i viventi, vien a esprimere i frutti che a' medesimi producono e apportano l'istesse lor opere. Un tal simbolo e la spiegazione che gli danno i Thibetani sono direttamente opposti e formalmente esclusivi del fato.” Petech, 1955, VI, DR. 3:307, 308.
5. Cf. 2 Cor. 4:18.
6. Polichetti, 2017.
7. Except for materialistic heterodox currents (*nāstika*) such as *chārvāka* and *lokāyata*.
8. The *Bar.Do* of the postmortem state is actually only one of the six intermediate stages posed by the relevant theoretical context: the *Bar.Do* that starts from conception and lasts until the last breath; the *Bar.Do* of the dream state; the *Bar.Do* of meditation; the *Bar.Do* of the process of death; the *Bar.Do* of the emersion of the pure and luminous nature of the mind; and the *Bar.Do* of taking rebirth.
9. Polichetti, 2015.
10. I would like to thank here Enzo Gualtiero Bargiacchi both for these succinct notes taken from the numerous works of Father Ippolito Desideri, as well as for his decisive role in organizing the exhibition *La rivelazione del Tibet. Ippolito Desideri e l'esplorazione scientifica italiana nelle terre più vicine al cielo* (Pistoia, Palazzo Sozzifanti, October 14, 2017–January 7, 2018), and the Conference of which these *Acts* are but one of the auspicious outcomes.
11. Tibetan *mGo.sKar.Gyi.bLa.Ma.I.Po.li.do*; in *Notizie Istoriche del Thibet, e Memorie de' viaggi, e missione ivi fatta dal P. Ippolito Desideri della Compagnia di Giesù Dal medesimo scritte, e dedicate 1712–1733*.
12. “non vi è cosa veruna che non sia affatto vota d'ogn'essere; e ciò perché non vi è cosa veruna che sia da sé [. . .] che sia per sua medesima natura e per sua propria intrinseca essenza [. . .] che sia totalmente indipendente [. . .] inconnessa, inconcattata e incorrelativa, {ma} ogni cosa considerata secondo la sua quiddità ha qualche correlazione a qualche termine o oggetto, non ha assolutamente il suo essere da se stessa, ma bensì dal termine e oggetto della sua correlazione.” Petech, 1955, VI, DR. 3:204.
13. Notably, Athanasius Kircher and António de Andrade, in *ibid.*, VI, DR. 3:289–291.

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