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Khri-brtan Nor-bu-rtse Bon monastery in Kathmandu

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1. The history and the building of Khri-brtan nor-bu-rtse monastery

Khri-brtan nor-bu-rtse Bonpo monastery is situated near the Swayambhunath temple, which is in the northwestern part of Kathmandu, Nepal. The monastery was founded in 1987. More than one hundred monks live there under the guidance of the abbot bsTan-'dzin rnam-dag, the founder of the monastery. The main activities of the monks are religious ceremonies performed at the request of laymen. In addition, they study the doctrine of Bon, and practise a meditation called *rDzogs chen*.

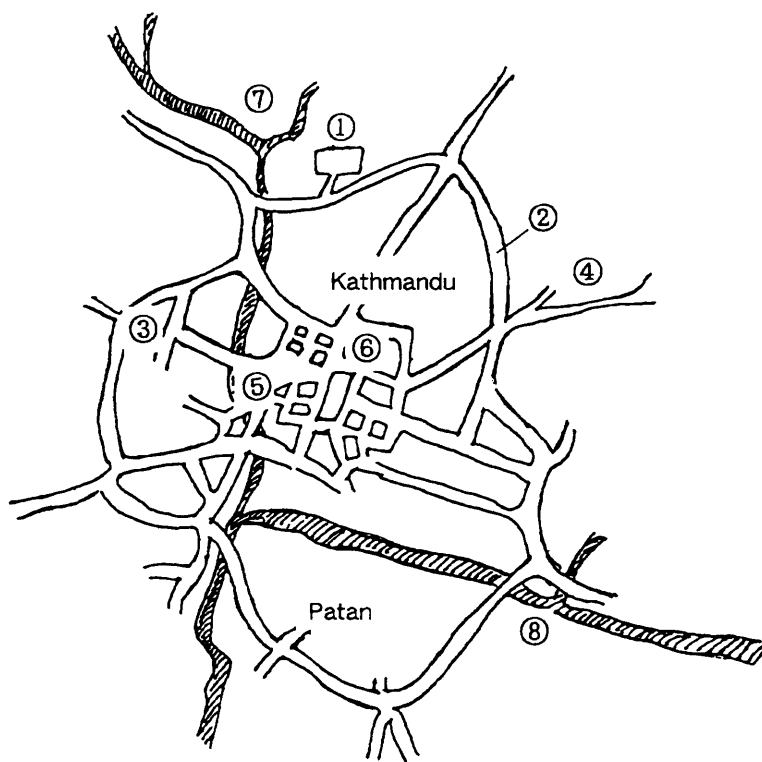
The monastery has two educational courses. One is the course of dialectics, and the other is the course of meditation. The former has eight grades of the student monks, and the latter has four grades. Each student selects his course according to his own interest and ability.

The Bonpo temple in Kathmandu is a revival of Khri-brtan nor-bu-rtse monastery which gShen Nyi-ma rgyal-mtshan founded in the Tsang province in the fourteenth century. The monastery flourished for a long time with the support of Bonpo devotees nearby. It played an important role in the study and practice of the Mother tantra (Ma rgyud). It was, however, completely destroyed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Tritan Norbutse Monastery, unpublished: 11).

Construction of the recent Khri-brtan nor-bu-rtse monastery began in 1987. Before that, the abbot (*slob dpon*) of the monastery, bsTan-'dzin rnam-dag, was in sMan-ri Monastery at Dolanji in India. At that time, he asked some Bonpo devotees to look for land to buy near Swayambhunath. Devotees purchased land and started to construct the first building in 1987.

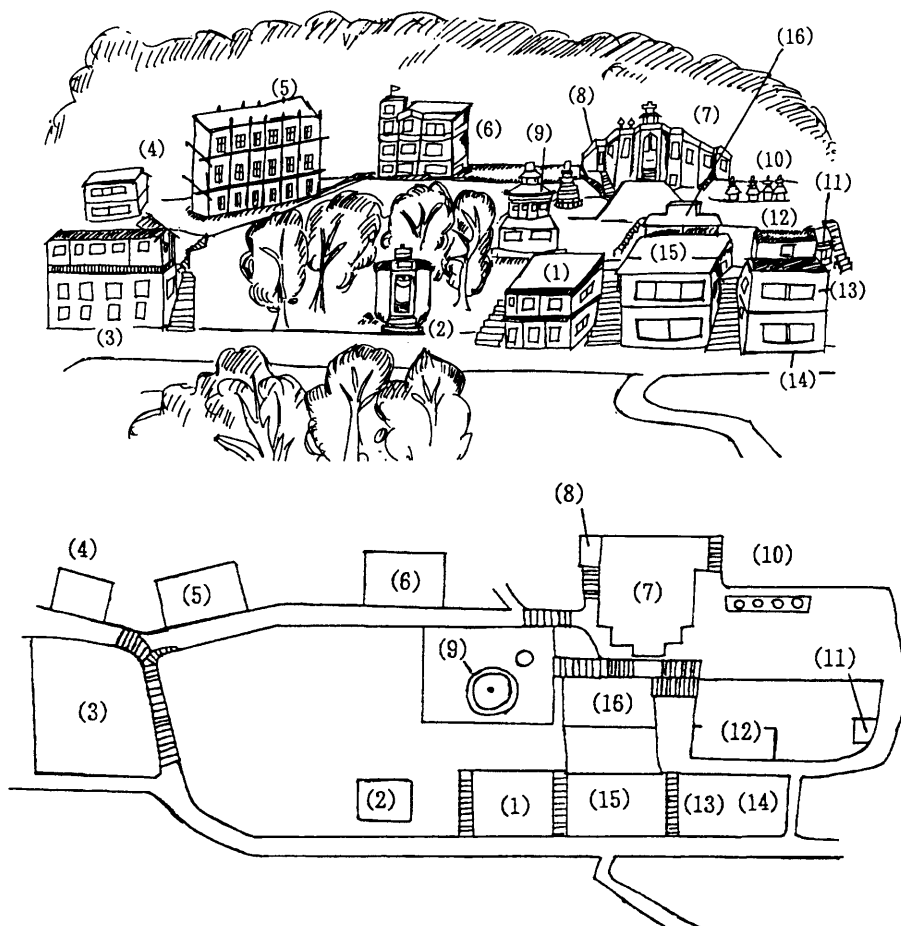
The Bonpo people explain their choice of the area near Swayambhunath as follows. First, Swayambhunath has an important relationship with Bon religion. This is because sTon-pa gShen-rab, the founder of the Bon religion, is said to have made two Newari Bonpo named Asho and Dhara build Swayambhunath. Second, Swayambhunath is said to have existed as a Bonpo temple before Buddha's birth. In any case, they consider Swayambhunath as a holy place for Bonpo people, also.

There were two purposes for building a Bonpo monastery in Nepal. First, it became very difficult to maintain the Bon religion and culture inside Tibet because of the Chinese invasion. They wanted to maintain the Bon tradition outside Tibet.



- | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| ① Khri brtan nor bu rtse Monastery | ⑤ Darbar Square |
| ② Ring road | ⑥ Royal Palace |
| ③ Swayambhunath Temple | ⑦ The Vishnumati River |
| ④ Bodhnath Temple | ⑧ The Bhagmati River |

Figure 1 Kathmandu and Patan



- | | |
|---|---|
| (1) Residence of the monks
taking rDzogs chen course | (9) Lamp Hall
(gSas mkhar li li bang bang) |
| (2) Matikor Hall | (10) Memorial stupas for masters |
| (3) Residence of the monks
taking the course of dialectics | (11) Hostels for pilgrims |
| (4) Rooms for Dark Retreat
(mun msthams) | (12) Office |
| (5) Library
(under construction) | (13) Hall for Bon po devotees |
| (6) Residence of the abbot | (14) Residence of senior monks |
| (7) Main Temple | (15) Guestroom |
| (8) Small Temple | (16) Storage |

Figure 2 Buildings of Khri-brtan nor-bu-rtse Monastery

Secondly, they wanted to give the opportunity for religious education to the Bonpos from Dolpo and Mustang where there are Bonpo monasteries but where they have no educational system.

Khri-brtan nor-bu-rtse monastery is situated in the north part of the ring road of Kathmandu [Figure 1]. Plate 1 shows the appearance of the monastery. It is situated on the middle of the hill covered with trees. When the first building was built in 1987, there was no road from the ring road to the monastery. These days, however, a road has been made and people can reach the foot of the hill by car.

Figure 2 shows the buildings of the monastery. Going up the path, you can see the two-story building first. The building is the residence of the monks belonging to the *rDzogs chen* group [Figure 2-1]. The ground floor of the building contains rooms for the monks, a shower room and a lavatory. The first floor has only monks' rooms. According to bsTan-'dzin mam-dag, more than twelve monks live there. Behind the residence of the monks, there is the building containing the training room for the *rDzogs chen* practices.

Next to the residence of the *rDzogs chen* monks, there is a hall where the huge wheel called Ma-ti 'khor-lo or 'Khor chen containing the Bonpo canon is put [Figure 2-2]. The appearance of the wheel is just like ma-ni 'khor-lo of Tibetan Buddhism. The hall was built in 1992 with the sponsorship of the Bonpo devotees in Kathmandu. The wheel was put in the center of the hall, and the walls of the hall hold paintings of one thousand Buddhas. It seems that either a middle-aged layman or a laywoman is watching over the hall.

Going up an easy slope, there is the five-story building, which is the dwelling of the priests of the course of dialectics. According to gYung-drung nyi-ma, who follows the course of dialectics, eighty priests live there.

A small two-story building is situated above the steps along the residence of those priests. The room of the second floor of the building is used for the practice of 'Dark Retreat' (*mun mtshams*). There are two types of meditations in the Bon religion. One is called Light Retreat (*'od mtshams*), in which monks practice the meditation in a lighted place. The other is called Dark Retreat (*mun mtshams*) in which monks meditate in a dark place. The windows of the room for Dark Retreat are completely covered for the practice. On the occasion of Dark Retreat, one or two monks meditate for seven weeks without coming out of the room. If it becomes difficult for the monk to continue the meditation because of fear, he may stop the meditation and come out of the room at any time.

Though a window is covered and the sunlight doesn't enter at all, the room has sufficient equipment for daily life, such as a bed, a toilet and a shower. All these are western style. Meals are given from a small window that is made so that light doesn't enter.

Next to the building for *mun mtshams* is the library, which is under construction [Figure 2-5]. The three-story building next to the library is the residence for two *slob dpon*, the leaders [Figure 2-6]. The senior leader,

bsTan-'dzin rnam-dag, and the junior leader, bsTan-pa g-yung-drung, live in the residence.

Above the residence is the main temple [Plate 2]. A big image of sTon-pa gShen-rab, who is the founder of the Bon religion, occupies the back [Plate 3]. The image is considered to be the form of the highest truth of the Bon religion, which is called *bon sku*. At the knee of the big image of the *bon sku*, small image of bsTon-pa gShen-rab in human form is placed. The big image was made by a sculptor from Bhutan with the financial support of Bonpo devotees from Dolanji.

There are two images of lamas on both sides of the big image of sTon-pa gShen-rab. One is the image of Dran-pa nam-mkha', who was the leader of Bonpo in the eighth century when the Bon religion was persecuted by Buddhism. The other is the image of mNyam-med Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan, who founded the sMan-ri monastery [Plate 4]. These two images were made by a Tibetan sculptor and donated to the monastery by the Bonpo from Dolanji.

Guardians of Bon doctrine such as Srid-pa rgyal-mo [Plate 5] and Mi-bdud are painted on the wall of the main temple of the monastery. According to bsTan-'dzin rnam-dag, the goddess Srid-pa rgyal-mo is equivalent to the goddess dPal-ldan lha-mo in Tibetan Buddhism, and considered to be the most important goddess among the guardians in the Bon religion. In addition to the guardians, lamas and one thousand Buddhas are also painted on the walls of the main temple.

The pictures (*thangka*) of the tutelary deities (*yi dam*) such as Ma-rgyud gSan-mchog mthar-thug are hung from the ceiling of the main temple. Also, nineteen mandalas of symbolic forms are drawn on the ceiling. Plate 6 shows the Ngan-song (elimination of bad destinies) mandala. Among these drawings, a painter from Bhutan drew the guardians. Priests of the monastery drew the lamas, one thousand Buddhas and mandalas on the ceiling.

On the right of the main temple, there is another small temple [Figure 2 -8]. Those pictures of peaceful deities (*zhi ba*) such as rNam-par rgyal-ba, who is the form of sTon-pa gShen-rab having conquered the devils, and the god Kun-bzang rgyal-ba 'dus-pa, and wrathful deities (*khro bo*) such as Phur-pa. A special monk is in charge of the small temple. He is comparatively high in position among the monks of the monastery. Taking pictures is not permitted in the small temple. In addition to *thangkas*, drums, cymbals and masks which are used in religious services and festivals are kept there. On the left of the main temple, there is a room where books are kept.

Behind the main temple, there is a building on the right, where a metal stupa called gSas-mkhar Li-li bang-bang stands [Figure 2-9 and Plate 7]. The stupa is one of the one hundred twenty stupas that are described in the biography of sTon-pa gShen-rab. The stupa has one hundred and eight containers of lamps. Those lamps are offered to the forty-five peaceful deities and the eighty wrathful deities.

In front of the main temple is an open space of pavement. The monks of the course of dialectic practice debate there [Plate 8]. The semester oral examinations

of dialectics are also conducted there. Other than the facilities mentioned above, the monastery has hostels for pilgrims, guestrooms for visitors and a hall for Bonpo devotees.

2. The educational activities of Khri-brtan nor-bu-rtse monastery

As mentioned in 1, the monastery has two educational courses, the course of dialectics (*mtshan nyid*) and the course of meditation (*rDzogs chen*). These two courses started in 1994.

The curriculum to get the degree of *dge shes*, doctrate, is completed in nine years. From the first year to the sixth year the monks learn sutras. The monks in the seventh and eighth years learn tantras. The monks of the ninth year learn *rDzogs chen*. The contents of the education of the course of dialectics are as follows:

The first year: Dialectics (*tshad ma*)

- (1) Objects (*yul*)
- (2) Recognizing subject (*yul can*)
- (3) Methods for recognition (*tshad ma*)

The second year: Preparation for the Study of Prajnaparamita of Bon.

- (1) The way of God and men who support each other (*lha mi gzhan brten gyi theg pa*)
- (2) The way of those who obtain emancipation for themselves only and follow sTon-pa gShen-rab (*rang rtog gshen rab gyi theg pa*)
- (3) The way of merciful Bodhisattvas who follow the doctrine of Vijnapti-matra (*thugs rje sems dpa'i theg pa*)
- (4) The way of Bodhisattvas who eliminate all conception (*g-yung drung sems dpa'i theg pa*)

The third year: Study of prajnaparamita (*phar phyin*) in Bon

- (1) The study of Prajnaparamita texts about the wisdom of Prajnaparamita (*mtshon byed zhe lnga*)
- (2) The study of the process containing ten levels and five paths (*sa lam*)
- (3) The study of Prajnaparamitas (*phar phyin*)

The fourth year: Madhyamika (*dbu ma*)

- (1) the secular truth (*kun rdzob bden pa*)
- (2) The absolute truth (*don dam bden pa*)

The fifth year: the study of the world, human beings and the other creatures (*mdzod*)

- (1) the existence (*srid pa*), (2) the ages (*bskal pa*), (3) the space (*dbyings*), (4) the wisdom (*ye shes*), (5) the vessel world (*snod*), (6) the beings (*bcud*), (7) the sense organ (*dbang po*), (8) three poisons

(*phra rgyas kyi dug gsum*), (9) dependent-arising (*rten 'brel*), (10) constituent (*phung po gnyis kyi mdzod*), (11) abode of perception (*skye mched*), (12) element (*khams*), (13) definition (*mtshan nyid*), (14) action (*las spyod*), (15) transmigration (*'gro lam*), (16) terrestrial world (*sa gnas*), (17) effect (*'bras bu*)

The sixth year: the precept (*'dul ba*)

The seventh year and the eighth year: tantra

The ninth year: *rDzogs chen*

In addition, Khri-brtan nor-bu-rtse monastery has practical subjects called *rig gnas*. These subjects are learned individually in Tibet. bsTan-'dzin nram-dag added these subjects in the course of dialectics in order to maintain Tibetan tradition. The subjects of *rig gnas* are as follows:

(1) Spelling and grammar (*dag yig*), (2) Poetry (*snyan ngag*), (3) Philology of Sanskrit literatures (*sgra rig pa*), (4) Meter (*sdeb sbyor*), (5) Astrology (*rtsis*), (6) Crafts of stupas and mandalas (*bzo rig pa*), (7) the things with magical power (*gzungs rdzong*), (8) Medicine (*sman*)

The course of dialectics is divided into eight grades. Each grade consists of monks in various levels. When a child monk becomes able to read and write, he may start the training. The monks of each grade can enter the higher grade after passing semester exams.

The subjects mentioned above are studied according to a timetable. The summer timetable is slightly different from the winter one. Figure 9 shows the winter timetable that was used in November, 1998. According to it, the monks study in each different grade in the morning, and study altogether in the afternoon. Each class lasts sixty minutes.

In winter, they have breakfast at 7:15. After breakfast they take a rest, and start to study from 8 o'clock. The monks from the first grade to the fifth grade have training of debate from 8 o'clock to 9 o'clock. The monks of the seventh grade teach themselves (*nan sbyong*), and the monks of the eighth grade learn the *rDzogs chen* from *slob dpon* bsTan-'dzin nram-dag at the same time. Figure 8 shows the monks training in debate.

From 9 to 10 o'clock, the monks from the first to the third and the sixth grade attend lectures about the dialectic texts from the teacher monks (*dpe khrid*). The monks of the fourth learn debate. The fifth, the seventh and the eighth grade monks teach themselves.

From 10 to 11 o'clock, the monks from the first to the third grade have debate. The monks of the fourth, fifth and seventh grades attend lectures on the dialectic texts. The sixth grade monks teach themselves and the eighth grade monks hold lectures for the junior monks on the texts.

From 11 to 12 o'clock, the monks from the first to the sixth grade attend lectures on the texts. The seventh grade monks teach themselves and the eighth grade monks give lectures to the junior monks using the texts. After 12 o'clock, the

monks of all the grades have the common curriculum.

From 12 o'clock till 12:45, all the monks get together. After worship, they have lunch. From 12:45 till 13:15, the teachers give instruction to the student monks using the texts. After a rest of fifteen minutes, the monks of all the grades have training in debate from 13:30 to 15:00. After the debate, they have teatime for thirty minutes.

From 15:30 to 16 o'clock, they perform religious services requested by devotees. From 16:00 till 16:45, they review them for fifteen minutes. From 17 o'clock to 18:30, they have training in debate again. After the worship from 18:30 to 19 o'clock, they have dinner as the end of their daily schedule.

The summer timetable is almost the same as the winter one. But in summer, the time for breakfast and rest is from 6:15 to 7 o'clock, and the curriculum according to their own timetable starts at 8 o'clock, the same as in winter. For one hour from 7 o'clock to 8 o'clock, they practise the training in debate together. The summer timetable of the morning and the afternoon is almost same as the winter one. Dinner starts at 7 o'clock in summer. It is thirty minutes later than in winter. As mentioned above, the monks of the course of dialectics study various subjects each day in their own grade or together.

On the other hand, the course of *rDzogs chen* is completed in four years. The course is divided as follows:

The first year; *A khrid*

The second year; *rDzogs chen*

The third year; *Zhang zhung nyan gyud*

The fourth year; *Ye khri mth' sel*

(Triten Norbutse Bon Monastery unpublished: 21-22)

At present, more than twelve monks belong to the course of *rDzogs chen* in the monastery. Among them, one monk over fifty years old had learned dialectics in another monastery for a long time, but he was not satisfied and joined the course of *rDzogs chen* in Khri-brtan nor-bu-rtse monastery.

The summer timetable and the winter one are also different in the course of *rDzogs chen* in the monastery. In the course of *rDzogs chen*, they start meditation at 4 o'clock in the morning in summer, and at 4:30 in winter.

Besides meditation, classes include the audience of the doctrine and worship. Their daily schedule is finished with the rite of 'cutting' (*gcod*) at 9:00 p.m. in summer and at 8:30 in winter.

3. Conclusion

The Khri-brtan nor-bu-rtse Bon monastery has been described above focusing on its facilities and educational system. The monastery is built over a wide and quiet area distant from the center of the city of Kathmandu. In the monastery, there

are facilities for the monks themselves, such as the main temple, space for *rDzogs chen* practice, a special room for *mun mtshams*, an office and a dining-room. Furthermore, there are facilities for laymen such as hostels for pilgrims coming from distant places, a hall for Bonpo devotees and guestrooms for foreigners.

In education, courses of dialectics and of *rDzogs chen* include doctrinal study and meditation, with variety in contents each day according to the separate timetable.

Here, I have left apart the investigation about the course of *rDzogs chen*. I hope to be able to study it in the future.

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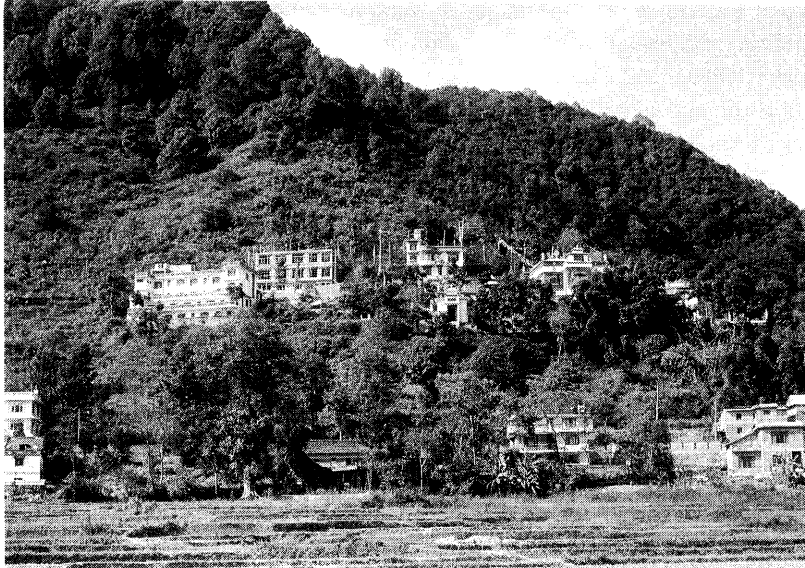


Plate 1 Khri-brtan nor-bu-rtse Monastery (M. Tachikawa, August 1997)



Plate 2 Main Temple (S. Yamaguchi, November 1998)



Plate 3 sTon-pa gShen-rab in the Main Temple
(S. Yamaguchi, August 1997)

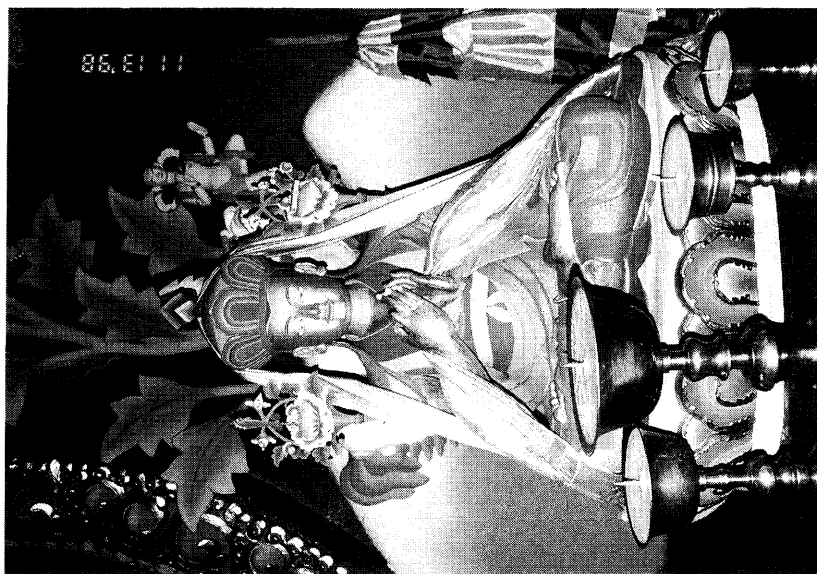


Plate 4 mNyam-med shes-rab rgyal-mtshan in the Main Temple
(S. Yamaguchi, November 1998)



Plate 5 Goddess Srid-pa rgyal-mo in the Main Temple
(S. Yamaguchi, November 1998)

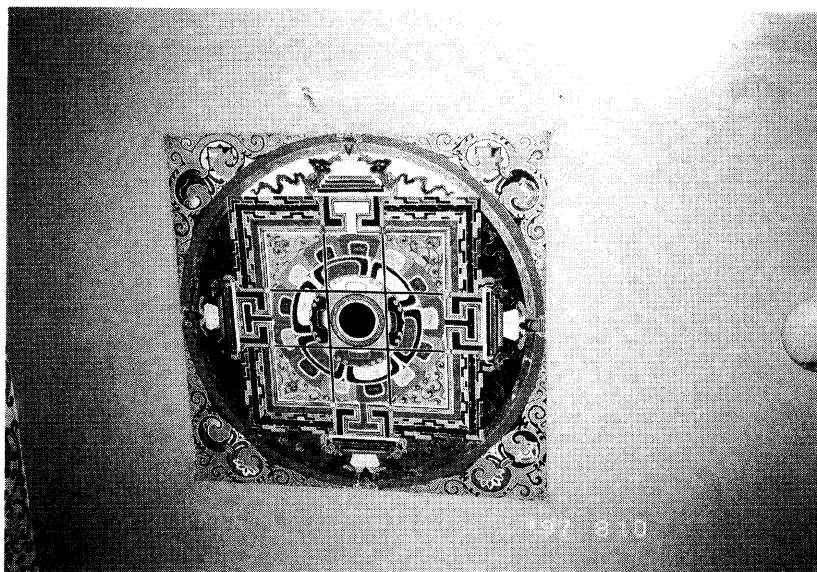


Plate 6 Ngan-songs (eliminate of bad destinies) mandala
(S. Yamaguchi, August 1997)



Plate 7 Lamp Hall (gSas-mkhar li-li bang-bang)
(S. Yamaguchi, November 1998)

