

Pretapuri : Sacred Landscape of Western Tibet as Expression of Spiritual Practice

Dennis A. Winters

Tales of the Earth, Toronto, Ontario, (Can)

gardens@talesoftheearth.com www.talesoftheearth.com

Attributes of traditionally revered places illuminate how spiritual experience can be expressed through design as sacred landscape, profoundly affecting people's lives. One's total absorption in its presence provides analytical prescriptions and inspiration to locate and design landscapes having potential to become a component of spiritual teachings. The Tibetan Buddhist landscape serves as a case study by focusing on varied degrees of subtle relationships among people, spirits and landscape. Expressed as external, internal and secret explanations in Tibetan traditions, these landscapes help cultivate spiritual development. Investigating the profound nature of these explanations provides grounding while actualizing the design process.

The sacred landscapes surrounding Mt. Kailas reverberates in hearts of a billion Buddhists and Hindus throughout the world, held sacred owing to the unique features appearing in natural formations of the earth, waters and skies, and energies emanating from presence of revered sages who taught and meditated at these spots. This landscape is considered embodiment of spirits, deities as recognizable natural forces; and through pilgrims' presence, designed as artistic expressions of spiritual practice and philosophical view used in quests to become peaceful with oneself and surrounding world.

Mt. Kailas embodies Mt. Meru, center of the Buddhist cosmological universe. Surrounding the centre are the twenty-four sacred sites recognized in Tibetan Buddhist systems of practice: eight sacred sites of the skywalkers, eight sacred sites of the walkers on earth, and eight sacred sites of the underground walkers. This composition is part of the body *mandala* of the Buddhist deity Chakrasamvara, physical expression of a purified landscape.

Pretapuri is located in this Mt. Kailas – Lake Manasarovar region of Western Tibet thirty miles west of Mt. Kailas. One of twenty-four sacred sites of the Buddhist cosmology, and pilgrimage destination since the eighth century CE, Pretapuri is considered gathering place of all wisdom

deities of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, their presence expressed as a designed landscape invested with symbolism and meaning. Pretapuri is one of the eight underground sites and represents the sexual organ of the *mandala* wheel. Scriptural guidebooks say that pilgrims must visit Pretapuri in order to completely fulfill the holy pilgrimage to Mt. Kailas. Having the same essence as Mt. Kailas, Pretapuri derives its power from the embodiment of wisdom, Vajravarahi, consort of Chakrasamvara.

Guidebooks use three layers of discourse to present characteristics and features of Pretapuri: external, internal and secret explanations, used here as basis to explore this designed sacred landscape. In dependence upon the relationship between people and spirit, some aspects of landscape are rich in external features; other aspects depend more on richness of internal explanations, so a minimal degree of human-modified design is visually apparent.

External explanations present physical descriptions of the landscape in cultural terms familiar to Tibetan people. Using geomantic terms derived from divination techniques, they refer to artistic expressions embracing a basic design vocabulary through subtleties of position, movement, interaction, wind, space, spirit, life and death.

The location of Pretapuri on the Sulej River, as described by Japanese monk Ekai Kawaguchi in 1909, constitutes one of nature's best essays on landscape. Incontestably dramatic, it amplifies the ability of landscapes' quality and characteristics to affect spiritual engagement, acknowledged by notable teachers who choose to undertake meditation retreats and disciples produce architecture in which to strengthen connection to place.

Pretapuri is sited at a *landscape transition zone*: liminal points of contact of form and space that defines positioning and relationship of landscape formations within their environmental context – between intersections of geological chapters, margins between ecological systems, topographic tendencies of rising and falling – where mountain edge meets level plain, outcrop hangs over valley, river cuts through gorge and flows over embankment, rock strata deforms in recumbent fold, wind rises with windward side and falls over leeward. It is where landscapes meet and speak with one another.

If nature is divinity, as presented by Plotinus, Aquinas, Blake and Berry, these *landscape transition zones* dramatically reveal the essence of nature's divine operations. Not unlike

celestial solstice and equinox, when people dramatically become acutely aware of seasonal values during the year, these landscapes provide a clearer sense of personal presence and identification through one's relationship to landscape, revealed through active movement of coarse and subtle energies riding through earth, in waters and on the winds – transactional grounds where people clearly sense the power of landscape and are drawn for spiritual renewal.

Internal explanations present stories and legends taking place as a result of having been designated and invested with the more subtle attributes to which pilgrims give respect and devotion accorded to a sacred landscape – tales associated with teachers living there, deities making their appearance and physical phenomena resulting from their presence.

Landscape features are modified as spirits in rocks, mountains, waters and the air, providing opportunity for pilgrims to engage with deities in ways they can relate. Consequently, scattered among shrines and low walls forming the most dominant feature of human activity are stones and landscapes identified as 'self-appeared images' (Tib. *rang-jin*), soft fine-grained sandstone and calcium carbonate remnants of the mountain eroded by wind-borne sand. As pilgrims circumambulate on prescribed paths, images appear in every landscape feature on the grounds, rocks and cliffs. Seen very clearly, *karmic* connections between pilgrims and deities become well established.

Secret explanations present the subtle visualizations and activities of Vajrayana Buddhist practice and the deepening awareness of the esoteric mandala. Pretapuri here arises as the purified environment of deities, produced through the power of the Six Perfections of Mahayana Buddhism: giving, ethics, patience, effort, concentration and wisdom. As cited in the *Prajna-paramita-sutra*, landscape is integral to cultivating the awakening mind, designed sacred landscape as artistic expression of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Keeping in mind these explanations, Pretapuri serves as a landscape from which to draw inspiration, sited and designed as component of spiritual teachings, medium for pilgrims' most subtle devotional practices, providing a basis for opening the heart and causes for attaining enlightenment – grounds for contemporary design efforts. The oral presentation provides visual accompaniment to this theoretical position.

Selected References

- Conze, Edward, trans. *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979).
- Dorje, Choying. "Story to the History of Pretapuri," *Bod I Jongs Nang bsTan*, (1990).
- Hedin, Sven. *Trans Himalaya, Vol. III*. (London: Macmillan and Company, 1913).
- Huber, Toni and Tsepak Rigzin. "Tibetan Guide for Pilgrimage to Ti-se and mTsho Ma-pam." *Tibet Journal*. (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Spring 1995).
- Kawaguchi, Ekai. *Three Years in Tibet*. (Benares: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1909).
- Tucci, Giuseppe. *Santi e Briganti nel Tibet Ignoto*. (Roma: Istituto Italiano Per Il Medio Ed Estremo Oriente, 1937).
- Ugyen. *Gnas Pre Ta Pu Ri'i Gnas Yig Gsal Ba'i Me Lon Bz'ugs So (The Clear Guide Letter Like a Mirror*.