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PRESS RELEASE  
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## Tibetan Temples and Monastery Complexes - architectural Reflection of the Buddhist Worldview

Architecture has played a significant role in the spread of Buddhism from India to Tibet. Buddhist temples and monastery complexes in the Western Himalayas reflect the Buddhist worldview. This was revealed by the analysis of partially preserved buildings done by scientists of the Institute of Architectural Science and Architectural Design at the Graz University of Technology. The project funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) thereby also provides for the reconstruction and maintenance of these religious buildings.

The Western Himalayas are a high mountainous area in the west of the Central Tibetan Plateau. The region now covers parts of Pakistan, India, Nepal and Tibet. The landscape is characterised by rough mountain ranges in the north and the south. Despite these inhospitable conditions, this area has always been a major trade route between India and Central Asia. There was an active cultural exchange between the trading peoples of the Western Himalayas.

### Import of Indian Ideas

A period of political unrest came to its close here in the 10th Century. The subsequent rise of the western Tibetan Kingdom was the starting point for the continuous strengthening of Buddhism in Tibet. During the 11th Century, especially under the Tibetan king Ye-she-'od, scholars were sent to the Buddhist centres in India. When they returned to Tibet, they brought along important scriptures of the so-called Mahayana Buddhism. The documents were translated into Tibetan and thus created the basis for a vigorous propagation of Buddhism in Tibet. In order to represent and communicate the Buddhist teachings through architecture as well, painters and sculptors were brought from India to Tibet and were commissioned with the execution of Buddhist constructions.

The available evidences from this period are striking, when one takes into account the local conditions. "Basically, only local resources such as clay and stone could be used. Due to its scarcity, wood was only utilised for beam structures and support of columns," explains Prof. Holger Neuwirth of the Institute of Architectural Science and Architectural Design.

### Evolution & Involution

Despite this scarcity of resources, the architecture of monastic and temple complexes were to follow the principles of the Buddhist worldview. The murals are often painted with the colourful imagery of Buddhist mandalas. "The complex symbolic images known as the mandala represent the cosmic evolution, also described as involution or self-discovery of the individual and the psychic powers at the same time. They form the basis of the epistemologies of Indo-Tibetan, Buddhist and Indian-influenced thought," describes Prof. Neuwirth. The geometrical forms of circle and square form the setting for these complex symbolic paintings which depict stories from the Buddhist teachings.

The principle of the mandala is also the geometrical ideal for the temple and its surrounding buildings - the temple as centre, axis and hub of the world. Some buildings were constructed of several storeys. Thus, they

symbolise the concept of a wandering soul which moves up from below to unite with the Absolute. In this manner a building complex followed the fundamental Buddhist idea at each level and imparted it to the outside world. Thus in a subtle way, the architecture here supported the propagation of Buddhist teachings.

Of these early Buddhist buildings in the Western Himalayas, only few are in a structurally intact state which allows liturgical use today. Moreover, in the course of centuries most of the religious buildings have been destroyed, or altered by modifications or additions, which makes it very difficult to restore them to their original form. The analysis, reconstruction and maintenance of these cultural treasures will be made possible by funds from the FWF. The results of the analyses will be shown with the aid of computer-based simulation and visualisation models (see video).

Image, Video and Text will be available online from Monday 17th May 2004, 09:00 am MEZ, onwards: <http://www.fwf.ac.at/en/press/tibet.html>

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Vienna, 17th May 2004

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