

Bumpa: Offering Vases

A *bumpa* (བུམ་པ་) is an ornamented vase widely used for religious rituals in Buddhist Himalayas. It is generally made of precious metals including silver, bronze, steel, gold and aluminium. In Bhutan, it is most common to find bumpa made from silver and bronze, and bumpa making is a part of the fine works of a silversmith.

The bumpa is made up of five major parts. The base of the bumpa, often known as its foot, is the round cone shaped stand. Above this part is the main body which is a round bulge shaped like a small pitcher. Its narrow bottom above the base rises extending outward in good proportion to the base and then drastically folds inward to form the neck of the bumpa. The slim neck, often less than one fifth of the circumference of the full bulge, rises up almost the same length as the bulging middle and spreads outward and bends downward to form the mouth of the bumpa. On one side of the bulging body is the spout of the bumpa, which first rises up to the level of the mouth and then bends outward.

The mouth, the feet and spout of the bumpa are often decorated with a lot of intricate carving, which may be plated in gold. A piece of metal work or wooden plate called khagyen (ཁ་གྲོན་) is inserted into the mouth. Its lower end which is inserted into the vase is round and its upper end is a flat oval shape plate onto which peacock feathers are attached. The front part of the khagyen would be decorated with carvings or have a picture of the Buddha stuck to it or a mantra letter written on it. The picture and letter depends on the ritual for which the bumpa is used. The bumpa vase is sometimes adorned in a silk cover which is known as *bumpai naza* (བུམ་པ་འདི་ན་བཟའ་) or 'clothes of the vase'. When being used, the vase is further decorated with white silken scarves.

The bumpa is used profusely in Vajrayāna Buddhist rituals. A special ritual called *bumdrub* or accomplishment of the bumpa is carried for important Vajrayāna rituals. This ritual involves the visualisation of certain deities and the chanting of mantras to cultivate spiritual power in the water which is stored in the bumpa. The water blessed in this manner is normally called *thrüchu* (ཐུ་ཅུ་) and served in the temples. The water is then used for ablution and for blessing materials for offering. Thus, it is a common ritual in Bhutan for people to sprinkle

water from the bumpa on the offerings such as butter lamp or food in order to purify, transform and expand it into a multitude of offerings. During the ritual of *thrüsöl* or offering ablution, water will be poured out of the bumpa onto the person, object or ground in a gesture of offering ablution to the Buddhas. Every Bhutanese home would have a bumpa vase which is always filled with water in the shrine room. Many households and temples also pass down a bumpa as an important heirloom or property of the establishment.

During initiation rites in Vajrayāna Buddhism, the bumpa is used as the primary implement for bestowing the first empowerment called *bumwang* (བུམ་དབང་) or the vase empowerment. The vase is visualized as a mansion of the specific Buddha and the Buddha is dissolved into liquid form and poured onto the disciples to cleanse them of negative qualities and endow them with enlightened qualities of the Buddha. The bumpa vase in Vajrayāna Buddhism symbolizes the *yonten* (ཡོན་ཏན་) enlightened qualities of the Buddha. Due to its auspicious and sacred significance, many people are also named bumpa.

The imagery of bumpa is also used in Bhutanese cultural symbolism, poetry and songs. Some songs describe the different parts of the vase in very exaggerated forms and ornate language. The inexhaustible treasury vase (གཤེར་གྱི་བུམ་པ་) is one of the eight auspicious signs which are commonly drawn, painted or carved in Bhutan. There are also some kinds of vases used for enhancing wealth (གཡམ་བུམ་པ་), investing power into the earth and water (ས་རྒྱ་བུམ་པ་) and appeasing the nagā spirits (སྤྲུ་འབྲུག་པ་). The vases, however, differ in shape, content and use from the common *bumpa* vase used for pouring blessed water.

Karma Phuntsho is a social thinker and worker, the President of the Loden Foundation and the author of many books and articles including *The History of Bhutan*.