Shambhala: Mountain Sanctuary

Shambhala is a mythical kingdom described in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism as a place of sanctuary. Paintings show the kingdom isolated from the rest of the world by a ring of mountains. At the center of the kingdom is the capital Kalapa, itself surrounded by another ring of mountains. The palace of the king has roofs of solid gold and is adorned with pearls and other jewels. Outside the capital, rivers divide the kingdom into eight regions arranged like the petals of a lotus flower. Each of these regions contains 12 principalities, so that 96 princes pay allegiance to the king of Shambhala. The illustration shows a Tibetan painting of Shambhala from the 19th Century in the Musée Guimet. Many travellers have tried unsuccessfully to find Shambhala. It remains a spiritual rather than physical place.

The Geological Upheaval

About 40 million years ago the northward-moving Indian tectonic plate collided with the Eurasian plate. The edge of the Indian plate was buckled and forced upward to form the Himalaya mountains. As the Indian plate moved under the Eurasian plate its surface rose to form Tibetan plateau.

The Himalayas, stretching in a crescent from the Indus River in the west to the Brahmaputra River in the east (shaded light yellow in the following map) are the highest mountains in the world. They contain Mount Everest and nine other peaks greater than 8000 meters above sea level. The only other mountains with such height are the Karakorams with K2 as their highest peak. The Tibetan Plateau, a vast elevated region north of the Himalayas has an average height of about 4500 meters above sea level, and is often known as the “roof of the world.”

Lake Manasarovar in the southwest part of the plateau is the world’s highest freshwater lake. Its name – “lake of consciousness” – comes from the Hindu myth that it was created out of the mind of Brahma. Just north of the lake is the isolated Mount Kailash (“crystal”), which may be the Mount Meru (“wonderful”) of Hindu mythology. Meru is described as

the central axis of the world, and the abode of Shiva and his consort Parvati.

Glaciers in the Himalayas are the source of many of Asia's largest rivers. The region near Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash provides sources for the Indus, Sutlej, Ghaghara (which is a tributary of the Ganges) and the Yarlung Tsangpo (which becomes the Brahmaputra) Rivers. The Yellow, Yangtze, Mekong, Salween and Irrawaddy Rivers drain from the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau (not shown on the map).

Colliding Religions

The main ancient religions of the Indian peninsula are Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. Hinduism began in the valley of the Indus River around 3000 BCE and became codified in the *Vedas* written between 1500 and 500 BCE. The main tenet of Hinduism is the concept of *dharma*, a principle that both drives the universe and ordains what is right and wrong. Individuals experience a continual process of life, death and rebirth, known as *samsara. Karma* ensures that all actions have their just and necessary outcome, although this might not

happen within one lifetime but in a later reincarnation. There is no single divinity but a multitude of forces that each play their part in the unfolding of the universe. The universe goes through long cycles of creation, preservation, decline and destruction.

Jainism developed from 800 to 500 BCE as an offshoot of Hinduism. It denied the gods – atheism – rejected violence of any kind – *ahimsa* – and declined worldly pleasures – ascetism. This was (and is) a religion for the few rather than for the masses.

Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama who lived in northeast India around 500 BCE. He renounced his royal upbringing, and through meditation and ascetism attained release from *samsara* and union with the cosmos in a state of *anatta* (non-self). He then taught his disciples the basic principles whereby they could do the same. Suffering is caused by desire for worldly things; one can escape from suffering by rejecting desire and following the "eightfold path." Many were attracted to this new religion and by the time of the Emperor Ashoka (3rd Century BCE), it had spread throughout the Indian peninsula, crossed the sea to Sri Lanka and travelled east to what is now Afghanistan. Travelling along the Silk Road, Buddhism reached China by the 1st Century CE, from where it later expanded into Korea and Japan. Buddhists from both India and Sri Lanka spread their religion to southeast Asia by the 3rd Century CE and thence to Indonesia and the Philippines. The following map is from the World History website

Islam was founded in 622 CE in Arabia and soon began to expand rapidly. The first incursions into the region of the Indus valley occurred in the 8th Century. Multiple invasions followed. By the 16th Century, the northern part of India was under the rule of the Mughal Empire. The court of Akbar the Great (1542-1605 CE) attracted scholars and artists. The following paintings show on the left Akbar receiving the *Akbarnama* (a history of his reign), and on the right Akbar discussing religion with Hindu scholars and two Portuguese missionaries. Both paintings were part of the *Akbarnama* (1605).

Notable in the above illustration is the absence of any Buddhists. By the time of Akbar Buddhism had essentially vanished from India. The Muslim invaders had destroyed Buddhist monasteries and slaughtered the monks. The holy sites in northern India – Sarnath and Bodh Gaya – had fallen into ruins. Most Buddhist temples had become places of Hindu worship. Remnants of Buddhist culture survived in the south, and many monks retreated to mountain sanctuaries in the far northern India and Tibet. Many scholars have tried to explain why Hinduism survived the Muslim onslaught but not Buddhism (e.g., Hazra, 1995; Sarao, 2012). Probably the most important difference was that Hinduism was a religion for the masses and Buddhism a religion for monks. Hinduism provided festivals and celebrations whereas Buddhism offered only suffering and

ascetism. Another reason was that Hinduism was pluralistic in its belief. Hinduism worshipped many different gods in many different ways, whereas Buddhism tended toward rigid doctrines. Perhaps laxness in the monastic orders also contributed to their downfall: why should the people support the debauchery of monks.

The Wheel of Time

Buddhism initially reached Tibet in the 7th Century CE. With the Muslim invasions of India from the 8th to the 15th Centuries many more Buddhists fled to safety in the northern mountains. They assimilated some of the religious traditions indigenous to Tibet and many of the ideas of Hinduism. The resultant doctrines became the basis of the *Vajrayana* ("diamond vehicle") branch of Buddhism, different from the *Mahayana* ("great vehicle) branch of Buddhism which spread into China and the *Theravada* ("doctrine of the elders") branch which spread to Sri Lanka and southeast Asia.

The Tibetan Buddhist teachings were recorded in the *Kalachakra* ("Wheel of Time") *Tantra* ("weaving/teaching"), which likely originated in the 10th or 11th Century CE. Its contents are only known through later commentaries such as the *Paramadibuddha* ("Supreme First Buddha") and the *Vimalaprabha* ("radiance of purity"). According to the former, the Kalachakra teachings were first given by the Gautama Buddha to Suchandra the king of Shambhala who had come to seek instruction from the enlightened one. (Newman, 1985).

Shambhala is described as a country north of the Himalayas:

> Shambhala is shaped like a giant lotus having eight petals. The outer perimeter of the entire lotus is formed by a circle of great snow mountains, as is the perimeter of the pericarp that makes up the central third of the country.

> The interstices of the lotus petals are formed by rivers and snow mountains, and the entire land is covered with beautiful lakes, ponds, meadows, forests, and groves.
>
> The central pericarp of Shambhala is elevated a bit above the surrounding lotus petals, and on it stands the capital of Shambhala, Kalapa. Kalapa is twelve leagues in breadth, and its palaces are made of gold, silver, turquoise, coral, pearl, emerald, moon-crystal, and other precious stones. Kalapa blazes with such a luster that the full moon is a mere pale disc overhead. The light given off by the mirrors on the outside of the palaces is so bright that night cannot be distinguished from day. The thrones inside the palaces are made from the finest beaten gold, and from the gold of the Jambu River. In front of the thrones are crystal looking-glasses that allow one to see far into the distance. On the ceilings are special circular crystal skylights that allow one to observe the palaces, gods, and parks of the sun, moon, and stars, as well as the rotating celestial spheres, and even the zodiac, all as though they were right in front of one. Surrounding the thrones in the palaces are lattice-work screens made of sandalwood that exude fragrances that scent the air for miles. The couches and cushions are all made of the finest, most precious fabrics. (Newman, 1985, pp 54-55).

The following illustration shows two representations of Shambhala. That on the left is from a 16th Century scroll in the Rubin Museum and that on the right is a 19th-Century painting. Both owe their form to the Tibetan mandalas used to demonstrate the workings of the cosmos.

Shambala was actually first mentioned in Hindu scriptures as the place where Kalki, the next avatar of Vishnu will be born. These scriptures prophecy that when the people of the world degenerate into greed, malice and immorality, Kalki will lead an army of the righteous to defeat the barbarians and establish “a new golden age of righteousness, prosperity and social order” (Newman, 1995). Buddhists also had proposed that a new Buddha, named *Maitreya* (“compassionate”) would be born in the future to restore peace to a troubled world. Tibetan Buddhism fused the ideas of Kalki and Maitreya to provide a prophecy that couldcomfort the people in the days when the Muslim invasions were destroying their way of life. (Newman, 1995; Belka, 2006):

> The Wheel of Time Tantra borrowed the Hindu myth of Kalki and adapted it to current religious and political conditions. The Buddhist refashioning of the prophetic myth says the Buddha taught the Wheel of Time Tantra to Sucandra, the bodhisattva emperor of the vast Central Asian empire of Sambhala. The eighth Successor to the throne of

> Sambhala, Yasas, unified all of the brahman families of Sambhala within a single Buddhist Adamantine Vehicle clan. For this he was given title Kalkin, which in the Buddhist myth means “chieftain.” To this day the Kalkins of Sambhala reign in their Central Asian paradise on earth, preserving the Wheel of Time teachings from the forces of barbarism without. At the end of the current age of degeneration, when the barbarian Muslims have overrun the earth outside of Sambhala, the last Kalkin, Cakrin, will assemble a great army headed by the kings of Sambhala and the Hindu gods. Kalkin Cakrin and his army—elephants, chariots, cavalry, and infantry—will come out from Sambhala to eradicate the forces of Islam. After the great Armageddon, when the barbarian horde has been obliterated, Cakrin will return to Sambhala to initiate a new age of perfection, Buddhism will flourish, people will live long, happy lives, and righteousness will reign supreme. (Newman, 1995).

At the beginning of Cakrin’s reign a wheel of iron will fall from the sky (Bernbaum, 1980, p 238). He is therefore also known as Rudra Cakrin (“wrathful one with the wheel”). The following 19th Century Tibetan painting now in the Musée Guimet shows Cakrin leading the forces of Shambhala out to overcome the barbarians:

European Explorations of Central Asia

In 1603 the Portuguese Jesuit missionary Bento de Goes travelled north from the court of Akbar the Great to Kabul and then traversed the Hindu Kush mountains with a caravan travelling on the legendary Silk Road, finally reaching China in 1605, the first European to travel the route since Marco Polo (Wessels, 1924; MacGregor, 1970).

The first Europeans to travel north through the Himalayas to Tibet were the Jesuit missionaries Antonio de Andrade and Manuel Marques (Pereira, 1921; Wessels, 1924; MacGregor, 1970). In 1624 they travelled north from Delhi, following the Ganges River towards its source in the Himalayas. The passed through the Mana Pass, one of the highest mountain-passes in the world (5632 meters), and finally reached Tsaparang, the capital of the Buddhist Kingdom of Guge in southwestern Tibet.

The kingdom had been founded in the 10th Century. The capital was built on prominent pyramid-shaped rock near the origins of the Sutlej River. De Andrade described the surrounding land as fertile with multiple irrigation channels. The king of Guge

allowed the Jesuits to build a small Christian chapel there. However, in 1630 the kingdom of Ladakh just to the west of Guge invaded and laid the country to waste. Today, Tsaparang remains as a striking ruin in a bleak and deserted land. Wood (2005) has suggested that this ancient Buddhist mountain refuge led to the Tibetan myth of Shambhala and the modern idea of Shangri La.

In 1661 the Austrian Jesuit Johann Grueber and his companion the Belgian Albert d'Orville travelled from northwest China into Tibet, crossing the Tangla Mountain range to visit Lhasa. They were the first Europeans to meet with the *Dalai Lama* ("ocean master"), Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, the fifth in his lineage. At the time of their visit he was supervising the construction of Potala Palace, the official residence of the Dalai Lamas from 1649 until 1959. Grueber and d'Orville then travelled south, traversed the Himalayas to arrive in Kathmandu. After exchanging gifts with the King of Nepal, they descended into India.

The following illustration shows on the left the Potala

palace, and a photograph of the Dalai Lama's quarters by Luca Galuzzi. The Dalai Lama, who has not been there since 1959, is represented by his robes. On the right is an 18th Century portrait of the Dalai Lama surrounded by episodes from his life running counterclockwise from his incarnation at the upper left. Each Dalai lama is considered a manifestation of the great bodhisattva Avalokitsevara ("god who looks down") The construction of the Potala monastery is depicted in the lower left. The Dalai Lama holds in his right hand a sceptre (*vajra*, thunderbolt/diamond) and in his left a bell (*ghanta*), the two essential symbols of Tibetan Buddhism. In a lotus flower over his right shoulder is a representation of *Padmasambhava* (born from the lotus), the legendary founder of Tibetan Buddhism). In another flower over his left shoulder is Thangtong Gyalpo, a great Buddhist leader, who in the 15th Century had built iron suspension bridges to facilitate travel in Tibet.

In 1712 an Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri came to stay in Tibet (MacGregor, 1970). He travelled north through Kashmir crossing the western Himalayas through the Fotu La pass and then making the arduous journey across the Tibetan Plateau to Lhasa. He spent many years in Tibet, studying the language and customs of the Tibetans. He was the first European to engage with the ideas of Buddhism. He debated with Buddhist scholars in their own language, becoming sufficiently adept that he could present his ideas in poetic form (Lopez et al, 2017). He tried without success to disprove their concept of reincarnation (*samsara*, wandering) and their desire for meditative release (*nirvana*, extinguishment/*sunyata*, emptiness).

It is fascinating to read his work (Lopez et al, 2017;

Desideri, 2005). He understood the Buddhist concepts of *samsara* and *nirvana,* but he found them illogical because they did not fit with his Christian beliefs: since death must lead to either salvation or damnation, how could it possibly lead to reincarnation. He described the ultimate state of mind – *nirvana* – that the Buddha ("Legislator") proposed as an escape from suffering. However, this had no attraction for him since it did not provide any greater knowledge of the God who created the universe:

> In the fifth stage of supreme attainment the soul, having passed through the different stages, and being delivered from successive transmigration and purged of all those deeds which are the origin and cause of the troubles of existence, and having discarded the passions which are the cause of such deeds, and thus having destroyed their root, finally approaches this, the last stage. Thus their infernal Legislator, under the pretence of searching for the root, extirpates from the hearts of his followers the real and primary root of all things—the knowledge of God. (Desideri, 2005, p 248)

Desideri failed to consider why a Buddhist should aspire to know a Creator God since they believed the universe had existed forever.

Ippolito Desideri was the first European to visit Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash. The center of a world which has existed forever without need for any Creator:

Many explorers followed these early Jesuits into Tibet. Much more was learned about the land and the people. Intrigued by the idea of Shambhala the Russian artist and theosophist Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) travelled through Central Asia and Tibet from 1925 to 1929 (Andreev, 2014; Roerich, 1930). A later expedition in 1934-5 sought Shambhala further north in Mongolia and northern China (Boyd, 2012). The theosophists claimed to have discovered the secrets of the “Masters,” an esoteric group of spiritual adepts centered in Tibet. However, there were no masters and their ideas were simply distortions of ancient Buddhist and Hindu religious thought.

Nevertheless, Roerich was a talented artist who left us with many striking paintings of the Himalayas and Tibet. The following illustrations show paintings of *Tibet* (1933), *The Mount of Five Treasures* (1933) also known as *Kangchenjunga*, and *The Song of Shambhala* (1943). The third painting shows Shambhala in the distance: a circle of mountains lit by alpenglow.

Lost Horizon

In 1933 James Hilton, fascinated by recent accounts of travels in Tibet, wrote the novel *Lost Horizon.* This tells the story of the British diplomat Hugh Conway, who in 1931 supervises the evacuation of some European citizens from Baskul (likely Kabul, Afghanistan) on a plane that is bound for Peshawar (then part of the British Raj, now located in Pakistan to the west of Islamabad). However, the plane is hijacked and flies over the Himalaya mountains – Conway recognizes the Nanga Parbat and K2 mountains – to crash-land among what appear to be the Kun Lun mountains. The pilot dies in the crash, but the passengers survive and are taken by a monk to a valley named Shangri La. The following is the description of their arrival

> To Conway, seeing it first, it might have been a vision fluttering out of that solitary rhythm in which lack of oxygen had encompassed all his faculties. It was, indeed, a strange and almost incredible sight. A group of coloured pavilions clung to the mountainside with none of the grim

> deliberation of a Rhineland castle, but rather with thc.chance delicacy of flower-petals impaled upon a crag. It was superb and exquisite. An austere emotion carried the eye upward from milk-blue roofs to the grey rock bastion above, tremendous as the Wetterhorn above Grindelwald. Beyond that, in a dazzling pyramid, soared the snow-slopes of Karakal. It might well be, Conway thought, the most terrifying mountain-scape in the world, and he imagined the immense stress of snow and glacier against which the rock function-ed as a gigantic retaining wall. Some day, perhaps, the whole mountain would split, and a half of Karakal's icy splendour come toppling into the valley. He wondered if the slightness of the risk combined with its fearfulness might even be found agreeably stimulating.
>
> Hardly less an enticement was the downward prospect, for the mountain wall continued to drop, nearly perpendicularly, into a cleft that could only have been the result of some cataclysm in the far past. The floor of the valley, hazily distant. welcomed the eye with greenness; sheltered from winds, and surveyed rather than dominated by the lamasery, it looked to Conway a delightfully favoured place, though if it were inhabited its community must be completely isolated by the lofty and sheerly unscalable ranges on the farther side (pp 74-75).

The following is from Orson Welles' 1939 adaptation of the book for the Campbell Playhouse. The text has been abridged but the sense of wonder remains.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/arrival-in-shangri-la.mp3

Conway discovers that the people of Shangri La grow old only very slowly. After spending some time exploring the monastery and the surrounding valley, Conway is given an audience with the High Lama, who is apparently a Catholic monk from Luxembourg who arrived in Shangri La in the 18th Century and is

now about 250 years old. The lama is dying and wishes to place in Conway's hands "the heritage and destiny of Shangri La:"

> >My friend it is not an arduous task that I bequeath, for our order knows only silken bonds. To be gentle and patient, to care for the riches of the mind, to preside in wisdom and secrecy while the storm rages without. (p 223)

The lama describes the present state of world affairs and the coming storm that will be worse than the Dark Ages in Europe:

> For those Dark Ages were not really so very dark—they were full of flickering lanterns, and even if the light had gone out of Europe altogether, there were other rays, literally from China to Peru, at which it could have been rekindled. But the Dark Ages that are to come will cover the whole world in a single pall; there will be neither escape nor sanctuary, save such as are too secret to be found or too humble to be noticed. And Shangri-La may hope to be both of these. (p 224)

The lama predicts that Conway and Shangri La will survive the storm:

> I believe that you will live through the storm. And after, through the long age of desolation, you may still live, growing older and wiser and more patient. You will conserve the fragrance of our history and add to it the touch of your own mind. You will welcome the stranger, and teach him the rule of age and wisdom; and one of these strangers, it may be, will succeed you when you are yourself very old. Beyond that, my vision weakens, but I see, at a great distance, a new world stirring in the ruins, stirring clumsily but in hopefulness, seeking its lost and legendary treasures. And they will all be here, my son, hidden behind the mountains in the valley of Blue Moon, preserved as by miracle for a new Renaissance. (p 224-5)

As he ends his speech, the lama dies. Orson Welles'

abbreviated version of the lama’s speech conveys its essence:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/lama-speech-from-orson-welles.mp3

A young member of the group that came from Baskul decides to escape Shangri La together with one of the young female postulants at the monastery. Conway warns that the young woman is much older than she appears and that she will become old if taken away from Shangri La. Nevertheless, Conway agrees to help them, and the story ends. In an epilogue, we learn that only Conway and an extremely Chinese woman arrive in Chongqing in western China. Initially amnesic, Conway later attempts to return to Shangri La. The last that anyone has heard is that he was travelling north from Thailand into the mountains.

The book became immensely popular. The world at that time was descending into madness and violence, and the book offered the comforting idea that what was good would nevertheless be preserved. The narrative sections of the book were exciting, but the description of Shangri La was, like all utopias, relatively boring. One interesting aspect of Shangri La is that it appeared much more European than Asian. The East simply provided a place of sanctuary for what was the best of European thought and art. Clear evidence of racism occurs as in the High Lama’s account of who should be accepted as a citizen of Shangri La (Goswami, 2023):

> … our last visitor, a Japanese, arrived in 1912, and was not, to be candid, a very valuable acquisition. You see, my dear Conway, we are not quacks or charlatans; we do not and cannot guarantee success; some of our visitors derive no benefit at all from their stay here; others merely live to what might be called a normally advanced age and then die from some trifling ailment. In general we have found that Tibetans, owing to their being inured to both the altitude and other conditions, are much less sensitive than outside races; they are charming people, and we have admitted many

> of them, but I doubt if more than a few will pass their hundredth year. The Chinese are a little better, but even among them we have a high percentage of failures. Our best subjects, undoubtedly, are the Nordic and Latin races of Europe, perhaps the Americans would be equally adaptable … (p 170)

Hilton was ambiguous about where Shangri La was located. Conway's plane crash-landed in the Kun Lun mountains. The ancient Buddhist kingdom of Khotan was located just north of these mountains but this had been in ruins for over a thousand years. After leaving Shangri La Conway arrived in Western China, and at the end of the book he was seeking to return to Shangri La by travelling north from Thailand. These statements suggest that Shangri La was perhaps located in the mountains of Western China, perhaps near Muli, a region that had been recently visited by the American botanist and explorer Joseph Rock, and described in an article for National Geographic (Rock, 1925, Clark et al, 2019)

In 1937, Frank Capra directed a movie of *Lost Horizon* starring Ronald Colman as the diplomat, now named Robert Conway. The following stills from the movie, show the plane crash, the lamasery, the High Lama and Conway's journey back to Shangri La:

Like the book, the movie is more exciting in the narratives of the arrival in and departure from Shangri La than in the time spent in the Himalayan utopia. Though Sam Jaffe's portrayal of the High Lama is memorable, the monastery in the film is much more like the mansion of a Hollywood mogul than any Tibetan lamasery.

Political Upheavals

In 1720 China expelled the Mongols from Tibet which then became a part of the Chinese Empire. In 1911 the Qing dynasty was overthrown and China became a republic. Over the ensuing years political instability in China allowed Tibet to become *de facto* independent. Isolated from the world, it maintained a feudal system of government. Though monks and aristocrats lived pampered lives, the people suffered like the serfs of medieval Europe.

In 1950 the newly founded People’s Republic of China sent the People’s Liberation Army to annex Tibet. According to the Chinese this was the “Peaceful Liberation of Tibet;” for the Tibetans it was the “Chinese Invasion of Tibet.” At that time the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso was only 15 years old. He and his regents agreed to a new People’s Government of Tibet.

In the spring of 1959, fears that the Chinese government was going to arrest the Dalai Lama led to escalating protests and demands for Tibetan independence. The People’s Liberation Army quickly put down the uprising. The Dalai Lama fled to India where he now leads the Government of Tibet in Exile in Dharamshala. Over a thousand years after his forefathers had fled from India and found refuge in Tibet, he had returned.

In May 1966 China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution began, and in September the Red Guards arrived in Tibet. Monasteries were looted and Tibetan leaders were subjected to public humiliation in “struggle sessions.” It was only through the intervention of Zhou Enlai, that the Potala Palace was spared from the widespread destruction. The following photographs (Woeser, 2020) show the destruction at the Jokhang Temple on the upper right, a closeup of two red guards surveying the damage from the second storey of the temple on the upper left, and the struggle session of a previous mayor of Lhasa below

Tourism

In 2001, the Chinese government renamed Zhongdian, a small city in northwestern Yunnan province, “Shangri La” after the fictional land described in James Hilton’s 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* (Kolas, 2008; Padget, 2023). Much of the population of the surrounding area is Tibetan. The government has rebuilt

several nearby Buddhist monasteries. To the north is Khawa Karpo a sacred mountain. The following illustrations below show the Ganden Sumtseling Monastery the Muli Temple, and the east face of Khawa Karpo.

In the past, believers went on pilgrimages to sacred places; in the present, tourists search for epiphany in foreign lands. Tourists may seek out the truth, but they can be easily attracted to inventions: the tomb of Hamlet in Helsingor, the balcony of Juliet in Verona, and the land of Shangri La in China. Even sacred sites are sometimes more fictional than real. Tourism is not wrong: it supports the local populace, and it increases our understanding of other people. One must just be careful to determine what is meaningful and what is not.

Shambhala and Shangri La

In Tibetan Buddhism Shambhala was conceived as a place of refuge from a world full of violence at the time of the Islamic invasion of India. One day the forces of truth would

come out to overcome the barbarian hordes and re-establish teachings of the *dharma*. The prophecy need not be interpreted literally:

> The real war is the struggle between the forces of enlightenment and ignorance that characterizes the path of the yogin, the tantric practitioner. When the yogin achieves adamantine gnosis, the transformative wisdom that is the goal of the of Wheel of Time path, he or she overcomes the inner barbarism that creates the evils of existence. In this esoteric, allegorical interpretation of the myth, the war between Kalkin and Islam symbolizes the radical illumination of the yogin in which correct understanding of reality dispels the darkness of ignorance. (Newman, 1995).

Shangri La was a modern fiction, also invented at a time when the world seemed to be heading into catastrophe. It shares many of the features of Shambhala. Many people have been fascinated by Shangri La. Some have sought to find it, but none have been successful:

> Ultimately, Shangri-La can be understood as a Western dream of an Eastern myth – it captures a yearning for simpler times, everlasting peace, sanctuary, and abundance protected from a violent and volatile world. But this paradise must remain elusive, for seeking it misunderstands and spurns Hilton's fantasy. Like the most apt utopia, it is literally "nowhere" (Padget, 2023).

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