

ASPECTS OF MONASTIC EDUCATION IN SIKKIM

- Dr. Chowang Acharya

An Introduction to the Monastic Heritage in Sikkim

Sikkim is basically a land of monasteries established in the middle of the 17th century by the great masters who were renowned followers of Guru Padmasambhava. The land is historically known as Beyul Demojong and it was personally blessed by Guru Rinpoche. Ever since the time His Holiness Guru Rinpoche set his holy feet on this land, Gonpas have constantly been constructed one after another basically as places of worship. Today one can hardly travel a few miles in Sikkim without coming across a Gompa erroneously almost always equated with an ideal monastery.

A mere construction of Gonpas is not enough in itself. Unless a monastery is equipped with a Sheda- a centre of higher learning and a Dupda- a meditation centre, for all practical purpose incomplete. A well established Sheda and an equally suitable Dupda are the two essential components to lend significance and respectability to a monastery. A Sheda provides the facility for increasing knowledge and skill of all sorts while a Dupda is helpful in providing higher training in developing control over the mind, the soul, and the senses to person. However it is not always possible to have these two essential organs in all the Gonpas due to so many factors. This is true in the case of Sikkim also.

In the Gonpas of Sikkim there are very few well organised monastic schools. Earlier, in the Gonpas there was a system of apprenticeship for the new entrants. Young monks got their education from the elders who looked after and taught them traditional ritualistic prayers, religious tenets, the use of religious musical instruments during rites, mask dances and many other things and practices.

Monastic education is one of the oldest form of learning. It can be traced back to the ancient Indian educational system. The Gurukuls of the Ramayana and Mahabharata periods and then Nalanda and Vikramashila Universities were nothing but well developed monastic schools where Hindus and Buddhist scholars could acquire higher knowledge in general, as well as in respect of their individual faiths.

This system of education was very much prevalent in Tibet from where it came to Sikkim lock, stock and barrel, but subsequently underwent some changes here according to the local conditions and realities. The model monastery in Tibet which inspired the Sikkimese offshoot was the SAMYE University estd. in Tibet in the 8th century by Khen-Lop-Cho-Sum. This monastic establishment initiated the development of a whole new religious culture on an unprecedented scale. The learning of foreign languages was instituted. With it came the activities of translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit and Chinese into Tibetan. Foreign Buddhist masters soon flocked to Samye University, Lhasa, Tibet. Tibetan monks, for the first time, were able to

begin to contemplate writing Buddhist treatises.

Most of the great Siddhas, scholars, writers and thinkers were the direct products of this monastic institution in Tibet. This is the case in Sikkim too where monastic schools have been and still are the main centres of learning and source of higher knowledge.

Sikkim is basically a land of the Nyingma School of Buddhism which incidentally is the oldest of the four offshoots of the Mahayana system of Buddhism originating in ancient India. Just as the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism came to take roots in Sikkim some 300 years ago, having travelled a long way from India via Tibet, the Monastic system of education too flourished in Sikkim more or less on the lines of the Tibetan and Indian Gurukul systems. But all things, subject to change as they are, pass through various stages of transformation. This system of education too that I am going to talk about has naturally weathered winds of change and is here for all of us to see in its present form. But I must admit that it has been strong enough to maintain its basic identity, withstanding the onslaught of the changing times.

To be precise, monastic education has, from time immemorial, been a very effective mode of education. In fact, it would not be stretching things too far to say that modern residential schools and colleges are nothing but modern derivations of this system.

Buddhism has two main schools: Hinayana and Mahayana. Hinayana is the pristine form and is mainly followed in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma and its sacred language is Pali. Whereas the Mahayana form is followed in Sikkim and many other parts of India, Tibet, China, Mongolia, Japan, Nepal and Bhutan etc. Its sacred language is Sanskrit, the original language of Arya Desh (India). Modern scholars questioned the accuracy of several points in this account about the language in which Buddha gave his teachings. Some claim Pali to be the language of Buddha while others claim it to be Sanskrit. The fact is that he taught the eighty four thousand sets of teaching containing his complete instructions to counteract the eighty four thousand delusions in accordance with the wishes, thoughts and capabilities of individual disciples in a layman's language of a given area. He did not follow any one particular language. It is said in one of his Sutras 'The Lalitvistara Sutra' that he gave teachings in the language of all living beings. The essential underlying point of this is that the language which the Buddha spoke was understood by all living beings. Such was the power of his speech.

Historically it is proved that the original Noble teachings of the Buddha were found in Pali and Sanskrit. But if at all there is a third language which has the closest affinity to the original, then it is the Tibetan language because of the manner in which the translations were done word-by-word, without diluting or distorting the inner meaning and various connotations of the original Pali or Sanskrit word. It was during Guru Rinpoche in the 8th cent. that almost all the teachings of the Buddha were translated into Tibetan.

Although the fundamental teachings of the Buddha are found mostly in Pali and Sanskrit, yet it is also a fact that in Pali we find only 46 volumes comprising of all

Tripitakas. These do not include many Mahayana Dharmas, Sutras and Tantras. In Sanskrit, although the priceless treasures of Buddhist canonical texts (Ka-gyur and Tan-gyur) containing more than four thousand sets of teachings are available, yet not all of them are available today. In fact not more than one hundred sets of teachings may be available in Sanskrit nowadays. The destruction of institutions and centres of learning in Northern India by a foreign invaders took its toll. Invaluable works and monuments have been lost forever. However this colossal loss is not so saddening as the complete collection of the noble teachings, the culture and tradition of Buddhism, are well preserved in the Tibetan language. That is why the Tibetan language is now honoured as the most important and sacred language of Buddhism all over the world. India alone has more than sixteen universities with Tibetan as one of their faculties while there are more than one hundred foreign universities all over the world which have Tibetan language as one of their independent faculties. Hence the source of the origin of Buddhism and monastic education in Sikkim is that form of it which was introduced by Guru Padmasambhava in Tibet during the time of king Trisong Detsen in 8th century. It is this system which is considered to be the ancient school or the Nyingma Tradition.

The Sikkimese Monastic Life in the Days of Yore

In the beginning, Pema Yangtse and Tashiding Gonpas and many others were in the practice of sending batches of young monks to Mindrol-Ling and Dorji-Dak Monasteries in Tibet for instruction in strict discipline and religious rites. After undergoing this, these lamas used to come back to their respective Gonpas and teach whatever they had learned, to the interested devotees. Because of the lack of well organised educational setups at the monasteries, only few people received this education of basically ritualistic practices. It was the beginning of Buddhist studies in Sikkim.

The term Gonpa literally means, a solitary place and most of the Gonpas are still found in solitary places. Isolation from the world has always been an essentially desirable thing for Buddhist monks, though not as an act of self-punishment, but more as an escape from the mundane temptations of day-to-day life.

All Gonpas are open to members of all communities and classes of Sikkim such as Bhutias, Lepchas, Limbus, Tamangs, Sherpas etc. The monastic education system has been sustained by the Sikkimese traditional custom of sending at least one male member from every family to some Gonpa. This practice imbibed from the Tibetan way, is fostered by the innately religious nature of the people and the attractions attached with the high social position and the consequent privileges enjoyed by the lamas.

A monk student at a monastery is taught Tibetan Alphabet and afterwards to read and recite by heart some special prayer books and so on. By this time he is simply a learner. After some years of reading, writing and reciting of religious scriptures by heart he is, now for the first time brought under monastic rules. He is ceremoniously shaved, has to take certain vows and take to the dress of a monk. He is given a reli-

gious name. The boy is now subject to the monastic rules and discipline and must abide by them. He has to learn by heart the books of all kinds of rituals.

Before being admitted as a junior monk the boy has to work as an apprentice running errands for and helping out the elder monks besides getting trained in making Tormas and playing various musical instruments.

The monk perfect in ritualistic practices, is now free to learn science of language, astrology and painting etc. He is also given a different responsibilities to serve the Gonpa for its over all development. On completing all these services he becomes an important functionary of the Gonpa.

However, this system of education was followed only in a few renowned Gonpas like those at Pemayangtse, Tashiding, Phensang, Enchey and Kathok-all from Nyingma school and Ralang, Rumtek and Phodong of Kagyudpa school.

This system has proved effective in maintaining a fairly high moral and intellectual standard within the religious community here. By modern standards, this system, though very good in itself has the inherent defect of entirely ignoring the scientific knowledge of recent centuries more or less because practitioners of religion have always tended to prefer to carry on their activities in segregation from the mainstream life. The monastic system as such is not something strange or out of the way. The basic purpose of this system is to broaden and cultivate the mind by imparting a wide variety of knowledge relating to all kinds of subjects i.e. drama, dance and music, astrology, poetry and composition etc. But somehow of late (I mean, in terms of a few centuries) Shedhas attached to gonpas have tended to concentrate only on religious education to the exclusion of all other subjects. This tendency has been reversed in the case of Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies, Deorali and Rumtek Sri Nalanda Institute for Higher education, where the course includes the art of healing (medicine), Astrology, Sanskrit, Pali, Arts and crafts, Tibetan Language, Dialectics and Metaphysics etc. The last being the most important and fundamental.

The Modern Currents

To preserve the traditional way of teaching and to give it a clearly identifiable face, commendable efforts have been made by the department of Ecclesiastical Affairs, Government of Sikkim. The Government extends financial help to the Gonpas for their maintenance besides doing everything to make it flourish with the objective of protecting and preserving this age old system.

As said earlier, an ideal monastery is that which has the facility of imparting higher studies through Sheda where monks can acquire Higher Buddhist Studies, and where there is Dupda to enable the scholars to utilize their knowledge to train their minds to attain Enlightenment. Besides, it also should have a worshipping main shrine where the monk students may practice the ritualistic system. So to develop the Ideal Monastic setup and to preserve and give a boost to the Nyingmapa Buddhist philosophy the Government of Sikkim is running Sheda for higher Buddhist studies. This

Sheda is established in the early 1960's by the then Chogyal Sir Tashi Namgyal of Sikkim with a view to promote and preserve Buddha Dharma. The Chogyal took special interest in monastic education. It was his long cherished dream to setup an ideal monastery in Sikkim.

Realizing the need for preserving the traditional way of teaching higher religious philosophy with a touch of modernism, the government took initiative for its development and made it affiliate to the Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, Varanasi in 1983 as a post graduate level Institute which offers a nine year advance study course leading to Acharya Degree (equivalent to M.A.). This University has full fledged Buddhist Philosophy Faculty and because Sanskrit, the sacred language of the Mahayana school, has been the bedrock of the University. This Sheda renamed as 'Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies', specialises in the line of Nyingma Tradition of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism.

Sheda at its present location enjoys an enviable unique privilege. Existing in close proximity to the sacred Chorten, the Do-ta-bu and the Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology it breathes an inspiring serenity, the effect of which is enhanced further by the right greenery that surrounds the whole area around it. The wisdom for an institution basically meant for preserving and furthering the quintessential religious and cultural heritage of Sikkim leaves us full of admiration for it. Later, Sheda came to acquire all the more importance when it became a seat of formal education too after its affiliation to Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, Varanasi. Then onwards the thrust of its teaching facility became two-pronged-equipping the students to face the job-market and the changing world at large besides fulfilling its primary objective stated earlier. It must always be borne in mind here that without a judicious blending of both traditionalism and modernism-i.e.. tradition enriched by a fair sprinkling of modernity-it would be difficult to preserve or promote something.

We are all only too aware of the fact that there are occasions when great scholars have been unable to express their innermost feelings simply because they have lived too secluded and existence unaware of the developments of the fast-changing world, or because they are not trained in any language other than their own. Translations by third persons do help to some extent but they lack the real spirit of the original speaker or commentator.

Hence the need for studying traditional as well as modern languages cannot be overemphasized. For propagation, promotion and perpetuation of one's point of view by a certain language group to other target groups this pre-supposes the use of one or more languages as a common link. Sheda is a living, vibrant example of such an academic pursuit. Here, in the midst of pulsating life all around it-and yet blissfully isolated from all this too, a different sparkling streams of languages coexist side by side on the Sheda campus and in effect, traditional ways are gently blown over by some of the fragrances of contemporary thoughts and realities.

Sanskrit, Tibetan language, Religious History of India and Tibet, Astrology and English are also taught as a compulsory subjects in this Institute upto the graduation level to enable the monk students to equip better to face the world and to contemplate

religious thoughts, translate Tibetan texts and put across his feelings in a better way.

Now serious efforts are being made by the government to promote education in various Gompas. There are now 268 Gompas including Lhakhangs and Tsahamkhangs in this State. The Government extends financial assistance towards their preservation and maintenance from time to time on the basis of their needs. Starting with 15 Monastic schools in addition to two already in existence in 1985, there are now 50 such schools scattered all over the State. Most of them are located in rural areas. Besides, some improvements were also brought into traditional monastic arts school for the training of Thangka Paintings, Wood-carving and Clay Statue making.

Revival and encouragement of this traditional system of education in monasteries has given a breath of fresh air to most of the monasteries in Sikkim.

The happiest development of all in recent times, in the field of monastic education in Sikkim, is a proposal, though still in the melting-pot, to introduce formal primary education in all the monasteries. If it comes through it will be a landmark development in the history of Sikkim and naturally will make the traditional monastic education to a quantum jump. This mingling of the traditional and the modernism will lend more worthwhileness to the earlier system and make it more relevant and in tune with the modern times.

I have tried to keep myself confined to the confines of the given subject and not touched upon the general educational system in the State. Besides, I may have gone wide off the mark sometimes, but that, I think is only human. Moreover, I may have left untouched some aspect of the monastic education system as well, but that, again is not beyond a human folly.

Sarvamangalam.
