

Lamaism in Tibet

A Brief Survey

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There is no denying the fact that Buddhism spread not only in India but also in the remote countries of the world from caucasus to Kamchatka and Buryat Siberia to Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal and played an important part in the religious life of the people of those countries for several centuries. Before the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, Bon was the sole religion there till the 7th century A. D. In this context it may be pointed out here that, Bon was a primitive type of religion with the dominating Shamaism, a kind of sorcery working on psychic levels, a form of nature worship with sacrifice to vaguely defined gods of earth and sky.

The seventh century A. D. (569-649 A. D. or 617-697 A. D.) witnessed the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet during the reign of king Srong Tsan Gam po, his two wives, one Chinese Kong-jo revered as the incarnation of goddess Tara (Tibetan Sgrol-ma—Dolma) and the other Nepalese Princess Bhrikuti Devi said to be the incarnation of goddess Sarasvati. They prevailed upon the king to introduce Saddharma i.e., Buddhism in Tibet, which in course of time became the State religion of Tibet. The king thus became very famous in the history of Tibet and was known as Chos-rgyal—Dharmaraja.

It is pertinent to point out here to a great event in the Tibetan history during his reign. One of his celebrated ministers Thomi Sambota (The noble Bhota—as Tibetan say) was sent to India with sixteen other scholars for studying the art and sciences of Brahmanas as well as the Buddhists. He along with the others studied Devanagari alphabets and literature in Kashmir and at Nalanda University under the guidance of great Indian Scholar Devavit Singha. He then

*It was after this Tibetan Priestly title of "Lama" (or "Aryan") that the Buddhism of Tibet has been called by European "Lamaism"—L. A. Wadell Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism, Preface P. VII.

invented the modern Tibetan alphabets modelling them after Devanagari letters, following the Tibetan phonetic system. He with his companions undertook one of the greatest literary ventures of mankind which continued for a thousand years, upto the very end of 17th century A. D.

We are told that Buddhism introduced by king Srong Tsan Gampo was not the pure form of Buddhism but was an admixture of Buddhism and Shamanism prevalent in the Himalayan regions. But Buddhism which was introduced in Tibet by Padmasambhava (Pad-ma-jung-nay) was Mahayana with elements of Tantricism therein. Padma Sambhava who was responsible for introduction of Buddhism in Tibet was invited by king Thi Srong de Tsan during the second half of the 8th century A. D. He hailed from Udiyana or Swat valley. He is still worshipped as second Buddha and his image finds place by the side of Buddha in some parts of Tibet. In Sikkim and Bhutan his image occupies the predominant place in Lhakhang or temple and Gompas or monasteries.

During his reign king Ral-pa-chen (9th century A. D) organised the Buddhist Sangha and erected many temples and monasteries. He also invited several Indian Pandits for translating religious books into Tibetan. Tibetan monks were sent to India for studying Sanskrit literature and Buddhist philosophy. His brother Lang Dar-ma jealous of the king killed him and mounted the throne. Under his reign religious practices were almost done away with and there was no peace in the country.

Not till the arrival of Atisha Dipankara Srijnana, a Bengalee monk of the 11 century (C 910-1054 A. D.), the condition of Buddhism in Tibet was not improved it remained practically in a moriband condition. Dipankara was highly famous for his learning, renunciation and wide travel. He also brought with him Tantrik Buddhism and reformed Buddhism in Tibet. As a consequence originated a new sect known as Ka-dampa sect.

It may be noted that two eminent Tibetan saints Marpa and his famous disciple Milarepa were born during the time. Milarepa is called cotton-clad Mila because of his living on the bare hill side in biting cold with a single cotton garment. At first Milarepa was a wizard. He then turned a saint then afterwards a renowned poet. He composed thousands of devotional songs known as gurbum in Tibetan language. These songs had made him most famous in Tibet. The sect to which Milarepa and his preceptor Marpa belonged was known as Kagyupa sect. This sect indeed originated with them.

In A. D. 1270, the great Mongol emperor Kublai Khan the grand son of mighty Chengis Khan invited Sakyapa Lama and delegated the sovereignty of Tibet to him and himself accepted Buddhism. This was the beginning of rule of Preist king in Tibet, the first phase of which lasted from 1270 A. D. to 1345. During this period many eminent Indian teachers were invited to Tibet. The King Chang-chub gyal tshen did away with the Sakyapa lineage and established the second line of monarch known as Sitya dynasty. Its lineage lasted for three centuries but, however, Mongol chieftain Ghushri Khan subdued the last king of this dynasty.

In 1351 A. D. a noble man was born in the valley of Onion (tsong) Amdo in North East Tibet popularly known as Tsong Khapa, Je Rinpoche, Lobsang dakpa (Sumatikirti), he was the founder of yellow-hat sect (Gelukpa). He reformed the monasteries and prohibited the monks to marry or to drink wine. He also founded three big monasteries Gaden, Sera and Drepung—known as the 'Three Pillars of the State'. Ganden dugpa the successor of Tsong Khapa was said to be the starting point of the system of reincarnation. In 1474 his spirit was thought to have passed into an infant born three years later.

The Dalai Lama Sonam Gyatsho (Punyasagara) is remembered as having spread the Buddhist teaching in Mongolia. He received the title of Dalai Lama Vajradhara from the devoted Mongol chief Alten Khan. It may be noted there the Dalai which is a Mongol term means "as big as ocean".

Among the Dalai Lamas the fifth the Great had a special place of honour. He invited the Mongol to assist him to subdue the adherents of the Red hat sect. The Mongols destroyed the Red hat and handed over the sovereignty of Tibet to the Dalai Lama. He built the Great Potala palace in Lhasa.

It is said that the Dalai Lama is the incarnation of Avalokiteswara - the Lord of mercy and uptill now there have been fourteen reincarnations of the Dalai Lama. He is also the head of Religious as well as temporal affairs.

The Panchen Rinpoche - The Mahapandita Maharatna has no political power. He is regarded as an incarnation of Amitabha Buddha and possesses great spiritual powers.

Various schools of Tibetan Buddhism originated by the 16th century A. D. The Gelugpa or yellow sect is the established Lamaist Sangha, next comes Kagypa sect founded by Marpa in 11th century A. D. There is another sect called Sakyapa. The last of the major schools in the Nying Mapa the older unreformed Red-hat sect of Padma Sambhava. The adherents of this sect are opposed to the monastic practices followed by the Gelugpa sect. They justify the practices on the Hidden revelation gterma claimed to be the esoteric teaching of Padma Sambhava. Apart from this sect there lies the primitive religion of Tibet known as Bon, influenced considerably by Buddhism, is extant in some parts of Tibet.