

*The opening up of Tibetan studies to Western scholars was largely due to the pioneering works of Alexander Csoma de Koros. Starting from his native land on foot in search of the original homes of the Magyars, thought to be somewhere in Central Asia, this remarkable Hungarian eventually reached the western borderlands of Tibet and devoted the rest of his life to the study of Tibetan language and literature,.*

**ALEXANDER CSOMA DE KOROS  
THE HUNGARIAN BODHISATTVA 1/**

by Dr. **ERNEST HETENYI 2**

Alexander Csoma de Koros, was born on the 4<sup>th</sup> April, 1784 in Koros, a little village in Haromszek, in Transylvania, then part of Hungary. The Csoma family was poor. It was only when he was 15 years old that young Alexander could get into secondary school. And this was only possible because the academy at Nagyenyed which he attended took every year some poor boys free of charge, who then supported themselves by parttime work to earn their very modest board.

At the beginning of the last century, the fancy of the Hungarians was stirred by an old tradition - that a part of their ancestors remained in Asia and that their descendants still lived there. Large stretches of the immense territories of Asia were completely unknown then and it was thought that there, in some remote and unexplored regions of Central Asia, there really lived a branch of the Hungarian people. This possibility gripped the imagination of the students at Nagyenyed so much that Alexander Csoma de Koros and two young fellow students made a vow to go to Asia in search of the Hungarians. As it turned out only Csoma was able to keep the vow since he decided to devote his life to Oriental studies as a preparation for his quest.

A stipendium from an English Protestant mission made it possible for Csoma to attend the University of Gottingen in Germany. At the University Csoma received free board and he was thus able to devote all his time to the pursuit of his studies in which he worked very hard. He worked under the best professors of Oriental Languages and his studies further strenghtened his youthful dream of going into the unknown territories of Asia.

In the Autumn of 1818 he returned to Nagyenyed. He was offered a teaching post by his old school but Csoma was not tempted by the security of a quiet life. Instead he went to South Hungary and Croatia to study Slavic languages as it was his intention to reach Central Asia through Russia. Then, to get ready for the long journey, he returned to Nagyenyed.

A councillor offered him a modest sum to help him on his journey. With 200 florins - all the money that Csoma had - in his pockets, he said good-bye to his friend and professor, Dr. Hegedus late in the Autumn of 1819, and set out alone on his long journey, on foot with a stick in his hand and a knap-sack on his back. As he ought to have served in the army he did not dare to ask for a passport. Instead he managed to pass the Rumanian frontier with a temporary certificate used by merchants travelling to Moldavia. Travelling on to Greece, he embarked on a small merchant ship to Egypt from where he set out for Aleppo, in North Syria. From there he began his wanderings into Asia. Joining a caravan he came to Mosul in present day Iraq and then on a raft down the River Tigris he reached Baghdad. Here he dressed as an Armenian and continued on his way to Tehran. At Tehran he met the English ambassador who gave him a grant of 300 rupees.<sup>3</sup> Csoma then began to proceed north-eastwards towards Central Asia. However owing to war rumours he could not find any means of getting there. Making a great detour he went to Afghanistan, planning to travel through India and Western Tibet to reach his final goal: Inner Asia.

On the Indian border he met with two French officers in the service of Ranjit Singh, the Rajah of Punjab. As former generals of Napoleon the two French officers were able to reform and modernise the army of the Rajah who was making a determined stand against the expanding British power in India. The Frenchmen stood in surprise as they gazed at the strange wanderer in whom, in spite of the queer asiatic attire, they recognised the scientifically educated European. Csoma was offered a job but he did not accept it. After a short time set out alone again, walking as usual. His plan was to go through Kashmir to the Karakorum pass. But he was only able to reach Leh, capital of Ladakh, adjoining the Highlands of Western Tibet. By now his meagre funds had run out and he learned that the journey into Central Asia was very expensive - and very dangerous. He had to return again, hoping to find another route to reach his destination.

This time he went via Kashmir. On his way he met an English explorer and British Government agent named Moorcroft. This meeting was to be a turning point in the life of Alexander Csoma de Koros.

Moorcroft saw with great astonishment that in Csoma he had met with a man of extraordinary mental powers matched by a dauntless will, a man who could not only undertake difficult intellectual feats but could also overcome extreme physical hardship. The British Indian Government was then in urgent need of such a man who could enter Tibet and study the Tibetan language. Moorcroft offered the help of the Indian Government if Csoma went back to Ladakh to study Tibetan and compile a grammar and dictionary of the Tibetan language. Csoma accepted the offer. Apart from his general interest in oriental languages he was attracted to the task by the possibility of finding kinship between his native Magyar tongue and the Tibetan language.

So he returned to Ladakh on the borders of Western Tibet and there in one of the coldest and highest inhabited spots in the world he took his abode in a Tibetan Gompa (tib. dGon-pa - Lama-monastery) in Zanskar. He engaged a learned lama as his tutor and began his study to which he was to devote the rest of his life. There in the lama-monastery of Zanskar he worked for a year and a half in a cold little stone room, without any heating, and enduring the extraordinary cold winter which stretches eight months in the year. As one of his English admirers once remarked, Csoma was living and working "in circumstances that would have brought to despair anyone else."

During this period Csoma was able to collect almost 40,000 Tibetan words. And so it was he who first penetrated into the Tibetan language and its literature and thus made a discovery of the utmost importance in the scientific world. For all this he received only 50 rupees - a not even modest sum even in those days. He had to pay his teacher as well as support himself from this amount and could hardly make ends meet. But the allowance, small as it was, brought invaluable results.

Then in the autumn of 1824 he came to the British Indian frontiers at Sabathu. The English commander there became suspicious of Csoma and had him arrested as a spy. This insult was never forgotten by the silent but dignified Hungarian. Captain Kennedy, the English commander, soon saw his blunder and later became a friend and felt

great respect for the Hungarian scholar. But first Csoma had to clear the situation and he wrote to the British Indian Government, giving a detailed report of his progress. Once again he received a modest allowance and was able to resume his work and studies.

He returned to Zanskar, the birthplace of his lama-master and lived there between 1825-26, staying for a short time at Phuktal. But by now the Tibetans began to suspect him of being an English spy. His Tibetan tutor could not dare continue his teachings and so Csoma had to return to Sabathu without having completed his task. At Sabathu a new and unexpected blow awaited him. The British Indian Government withdrew his spare allowance and was no longer interested in his project. They had discovered in the meantime the manuscripts of a Tibetan grammar and dictionary left behind by a German missionary. And they thought that now they could do without the help of the foreign scholar. However the English soon found out that the works of the German missionary which they had "discovered" was far less valuable than they had originally suspected. Once again they were obliged to turn to the Hungarian wanderer whom they had just recently dropped.

This time Csoma decided to settle at Kanam in the British Indian territory near the Tibetan border. His lama-master agreed to follow him there and for the next three years he resumed his research until the great work was finally finished. The Asiatic Society of Bengal invited him to Calcutta to prepare his works for the press. In that sweltering city of the Gangetic plain he lived just as he had done in the cold and remote fastness of the monastery at Zanskar living mainly on a diet of buttered and salted Tibetan tea and seldom leaving his little cell. His work, the first authoritative Tibetan Grammar and Tibetan-English Dictionary, was published in 1834. 4/ The whole scientific world acknowledged his considerable contribution to the world of learning. Many scientific institutions elected him as a member.

To study local dialects he travelled to northern India in 1836 and in the following year he accepted the 'post of librarian to the Asiatic Society of Bengal. But soon the old wish to get to the unknown reaches of Central Asia arose in him and in 1842 he took to the road again.

But by then he was 58 years old and 20 years had passed since he had come to India. With youthful energy he pushed on, hoping to

reach Central Asia through Greater Tibet. But he was destined to go only as far as Darjeeling, a British hill resort near the Tibetan border. For on his way, crossing the Terai swamps, he contracted malarial fever. Dr. Campbell, the British medical officer at Darjeeling who attended to him, could not understand the feverish mutterings of the delirious man. After a lifetime of search Alexander Csoma de Koros could approach the unknown land of his dreams only in his imagination. His body found final rest in Darjeeling.

The Asiatic Society of Bengal erected a monument over his grave. A Hungarian memorial tablet was placed on it at the beginning of this century. The words of the Hungarian Count Steven Szechenyi to the Hungarian Academy of Science upon learning of Csoma's death were engraved on the tablet:

"A poor lonely Hungarian, without applause or money but inspired with enthusiasm sought the Hungarian native country but in the end broke down under the burden."

Alexander Csoma de Koros was declared as a Bodhisattva (Buddhist Saint in 1933, in Japan. "He was that, who opened the Heart of the West for the teachings of the Buddha" - was the reason. His statue which represents him as a Bodhisattva, - a work of the Hungarian sculptor Geza Csorba - found a place in the shrine of the Tokyo Buddhist University.

1. His name in Hungarian: Korosi Csoma Sandor; in Tibetan: Phyi-glin-gi-grwa-pa - The Foreign Pupil; in Japan known as Csoma Bosatsu - Csoma the Bodhisattva; in Vietnam: Bo-tat Csoma - The Budhisattva Csoma. After his is named the International Institute for Buddhology (Budapest), established in 1956 by the Arya-Maitreya-Mandala, as well as the Vietnamese Institute of Buddhology (Vung-tau,) which works since 1969 under the leadership of Dr. Anuruddha, Upacarya Arya-Maitreya-Mandala.
2. Leader of the Hungarian Buddhist Mission; Upacarya AMM/ Deputy-superior of the Arya-Maitreya-Mandala for Hungary and Eastern-Europe; Director of the "Alexander Csoma de Koros International Institute for Buddhology" (Budapest).
3. In 1969, in Tehran a memorial tablet was placed by the East-European Centre of the Arya-Maitreya-Mandala to the wall of the "British Institute of Persian Studies". The English text is as follows: "Enjoying the support of the British Community Alexander Csoma de Koros scholar of tibetology resided in Tehran from October 14th 1820 to March 1st 1821. In Memory of the Hungarian Bodhisattva this plaque was erected in the year 1969 by the East-European Centre of the Arya-Maitreya-Mandala.
4. His two Tibetan lama-masters are: Sans-rgyas Phun-chogs and Kun-dga'-chos-legs;

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