

TIBETAN BUDDHISM.

The central position occupied by Tibet in Asia and its highly mountainous character have made the country a kind of storehouse of ancient Indian, Chinese and Central Asian cultural traditions. Buddhism, strongly influenced by the Tantric schools of Medieval India, is mostly known from Tibetan sources, for its ancient Sanskrit Canon has been almost entirely lost in the country of its origin, and is preserved only in fragments in the sands of Central Asia, and in stray manuscripts discovered from time to time in Nepal. Ancient usages, forms of artistic expression long extinct in India proper, are still current in Tibet, and such is the influence and rigid force of artistic tradition that a bronze image of the XIII-th or XIV-th centuries A.D. can hardly be distinguished from an image belonging to the XVII-th or XVIII-th centuries. A Tibetan temple fresco still recalls the master-pieces of Ajanta, and Tibetan sculpture of the X-th and XI-th centuries has developed under the influence of the Pala art of Magadha and Bengal. The conquest by Buddhism of the vast uplands of Tibet in less than two centuries was a remarkable achievement accompanied by a great emotional and intellectual upsurge which transformed the whole outlook of warlike nomad and semi-nomad Tibetan tribes, and changed the country from a militant warlike state into a stronghold of Buddhism.

Buddhism began to penetrate into the Country of Snows, the Himavat of the ancient Indian tradition, in the first half of the seventh century A.D. The first influences came through Nepal and Kashmir, later to be followed by a strong impact from Central Asia across the barren Tibetan upland. The first period in the long history of

Buddhism in Tibet lasted from about 632 A.D. to to 841/2 A.D., and corresponded to the so-called Imperial Period of Tibetan history when Tibet suddenly became one of the major powers on the Asian continent. The advent of of Buddhism coincided with the establishment of centralized royal power in Tibet. This early period was characterized by a long struggle between the primitive ancient shamanistic faith prevalent in Tibet, and the incoming

Buddhism. The period was characterized by a brilliant upsurge of intellectual activity during which time an enormous mass of Buddhist texts was translated into Tibetan with the help of Indian scholars. This literary activity must have been preceded by an extensive preparatory work, the fashioning of a new literary idiom. During the reigns of the early Tibetan kings Indo-Nepalese and Chinese culture penetrated into the country, and gradually became the culture of the Tibetan royal court and of the upper classes. The prolonged occupation of large tracts of Central Asia by Tibetan troops brought Tibet into direct contact with the Buddhist countries of Central Asia. The golden age of Tibetan Buddhism began in the reign of king Tisong-detsen (755-797 A.D.). During the reign of this king, Buddhism began to spread among the masses of the Tibetan people. Envoys were despatched to Nepal and India to invite learned panditas and preachers of Buddhism. To this period belongs the arrival in Tibet of the acarya Shantarakshita, of the great vihara of Nalanda, and of the Tantric yogin Padmasambhava. The two teachers presided over the consecration ceremony of the first great vihara of Samye, built after the model of the great vihara of Odantapuri in Bihar. The temporary eclipse of Buddhism after 841 A.D., caused by the struggle of the king's party with the feudal landed gentry, did not delay its development, and towards the end of the X A.D., the country could be described as being predominantly Buddhist in faith. With the advent of the XI A.D. begins a new chapter in the history of Buddhism in Tibet, characterized by the formation of the principal Buddhist sects in Tibet and the growing importance of large Buddhist monasteries which gradually became centres of political and economic power in the land. But Buddhism was unable to preserve its original purity, and soon fell under the influence of heterogeneous sects. The kings of Guge, a kingdom in Western Tibet, whose family ties with Nepal and India were always strong, became patrons of Buddhism, and sent batches of young Tibetans to India. In order to restore to Buddhism its purity, the Guge kings sent emissaries to the vihara of Vikramashila in 1043 A.D. to invite

the famous Buddhist scholar Dipankara Shrijnana or Atisha. The coming of Atisha gave a powerful impulse to Buddhist influence. He was a forerunner of Tsong-kha-pa, the great Tibetan Reformer of the XIV century. The revivalist movement inaugurated by Atisha culminated in 1076 A.D. in a great Religious Council held at the monastery of Tholing in Western Tibet. The followers of Atisha became known as the Kadampas, or the " Followers of the Doctrine ". A number of prominent preachers appeared during the period. Foremost among them were Marpa (1012-1096), the founder of the important sect of the Kalyanas, and his disciple Milarepa (1040-1123), poet and saint, and one of the most remarkable figures of Tibetan religious history. The period saw the foundation of the important monastery of Sakya in 1073 A.D. which was destined to play an important role in the Mongol period. In the XIII-th century the Mongols had established themselves along the Tibetan north-eastern border, and sent reconnoitering detachments into Tibet. They discovered that the political scene was dominated by rival sects struggling for power. Their choice fell on the Sakyapas, and in 1247 A.D. the head of the sect, the Sakya pandita was invited to the camp of the Mongol viceroy on the Sino-Tibetan borderland. Sakya-pandita's nephew, the famous Phags-pa Lama was made an Imperial Preceptor, and made the Spiritual and Secular Head of Tibet. This was the beginning of the special Patron-Chaplain relationship, a formula evolved to describe the feudal link established between the Mongol Imperial throne and the Spiritual Head of the Tibetan State, and which was again revived in the XVII century to last to the end of the Manchu dynasty. The XIV and XV centuries saw the rise of a new reformist sect of the Gelukpas which continued the tradition of the Kadampas founded by Atisha. Its founder was the great Tsong-kha-pa (1357-1419). A number of important Buddhist monasteries were established in the early XV century which became the seats of religious and political power in the land. In the XVI century the abbot of the great Drepung monastery near Lhasa succeeded in establishing a political alliance with the Mongol chief Altan-khan. The latter bestowed

on him the title of Vajradhara Dalai Lama, i.e. " Vajradhara, the Great Lama ". Having gained the support of powerful forces, the Tibetan hierarch was able to assert the authority of his sect. The Gelukpa sect was fortunate in producing a truly great leader in the person of the Fifth Dalai Lama Losang-jyantshe (1617-82), scholar and statesman, who left a strong imprint on the spiritual and secular affairs of the country. In his work for the unification of the country, the Fifth Dalai Lama allied himself with the influential abbot of the Tashi-lhunpo monastery who has been his spiritual preceptor, and who was recognized as the first Panchen Lama of Tashi-lhunpo, a monastery destined to rival in importance those of Lhasa, capital of Tibet. The thirteenth incarnation in the line of the Dalai Lamas, Thupten-jyantshe was no doubt one of the ablest in the line of succession, and is often likened to the Great Fifth. A forceful personality, he left a considerable imprint on the country. The Fourteenth Incarnation, Tendzin-jyantshe, was enthroned in 1940, and on Nov. 7th, 1950, assumed the spiritual and secular powers incumbent in his high office. The spread of Buddhism beyond the Himalayas had one important development - it carried the message of the Buddha to Mongolia, and later, in the XVII century, to Siberia. The steady spread of Buddhism in the North, culminated in the erection of a Buddhist vihara in St. Petersburg, the present Leningrad, which was consecrated in 1913. It is still standing having survived the enemy bombardment during the memorable siege of Leningrad in the course of the Second World War.

The existence of active revivalist movements shows that Buddhism in Tibet is conscious of the changing times, and there are indications that Buddhist centres throughout China have been called upon to participate in the work of National upbuilding and of safeguarding of treasures of Buddhist culture.

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