

## Lecture 55: How Buddhism Came to Tibet (Edited)

THIS IS A STORY OF SPECIAL INTEREST because of its sheer improbability. It is quite remarkable that Buddhism should have come from India to Tibet at all. We are accustomed to thinking of Tibet as a Buddhist country, perhaps the Buddhist country. But it wasn't always such. Before it actually happened, the chances that Buddhism might ever be transplanted from India to the Land of Snows must have appeared pretty remote.

India and Tibet may be very close as the crow flies, but they are in fact worlds apart. Between them there is a tremendous barrier: the Himalayas. This colossal mountain range extends roughly 2,000 miles, dividing India, on the southern side, from Tibet in the north. The two countries are therefore virtually cut off from each other. They are also divided climatically. India's climate is subtropical, characterized by blazing hot sunshine, torrential monsoon rains, and periods of drought. Tibet, on the other hand, at 12,000 feet above sea-level, has clear skies, a bracing atmosphere, and temperatures that are often well below freezing point.

With different climates we find different ways of life. India was, and still is, a predominantly agricultural country. The land has been cultivated for centuries, and its people enjoy a settled, placid existence in thousands of little villages. But in Tibet the economy was mainly pastoral. People kept great flocks of sheep and herds of yaks, and followed a nomadic way of life, wandering all over the vast open spaces, living in tents and on horseback. Indians and Tibetans also belong to quite different ethnic groups. India is inhabited by a mixture of the predominantly Aryan peoples of the north and the Dravidians of the south, while the Tibetans belong to a sub-group of the Mongolian peoples which also includes the Burmese and the Newars of Nepal.

All these factors are reflected in the marked differences of temperament which exist between Indians and Tibetans. At the risk of over-generalizing, I would say that Indians tend to be rather mystical, in the broadest sense of the term. They are very aware of the presence of a higher spiritual world or transcendental dimension. If you happen to meet someone in India, say on a bus or train or simply walking along the road, you can very quickly strike up a conversation about things of a religious or mystical nature. This is the sort of language Indians understand, the sort of outlook they accept and, in a sense, take for granted. Where practical matters are concerned, they can sometimes be rather vague and uncomprehending, but speak to them in terms of ultimate reality and they will know at once what you are talking about.

The Tibetan character is quite different. In the West we like to think of Tibetans as mysterious, exotic, other-worldly people. We imagine that when they are not levitating or flying through the air they are busy opening their third eye. But in reality they are not like this at all. From my experience of living among the Tibetans of Kalimpong, I would say that there are no people on earth more practical. They are hard-headed businessmen; even the monks know how to handle complex business transactions. And when it comes to practical tasks, even if they have not done something before they will study it, find out all about it, and puzzle out the secret of how to do it. Tibetans coming to India often made good motor mechanics; in fact they take well to anything of a mechanical nature. So whereas Indians are rather mystical, with their heads in the clouds (the Sikhs are an exception to this), Tibetans are very practical, with their feet firmly on the ground. Tibetans also have this practical, down-to-earth approach when it comes to the religious life, as we shall see in subsequent chapters.

Then again Indians, especially Hindus, are generally peaceable people. As individuals, at least,

they don't like getting into a fight. In India a dispute in the street usually remains verbal. The disputants may scream at each other, they may dance around each other in a rage, and perhaps even go so far as to pull one another's hair, but they are very unlikely to come to blows. Tibetans, on the other hand, tend to be war-like and aggressive, even swashbuckling. In Kalimpong some of the refugees used to strut around as though they had conquered the place. Many of them wore short swords, and they would swagger along the road, shouldering any Indians who happened to get in their way roughly aside, sometimes sending them flying. People learned to be wary of the Tibetans, especially of the Khampas of eastern Tibet.

I used to teach English to Tibetan students in Kalimpong, and I sometimes gave them an exercise in which they had to complete a sentence like 'I ... my brother,' filling in the blank with a suitable verb. In nine cases out of ten they would come up with 'I killed my brother.' A Nepalese friend of mine, who was the police surgeon and worked in the local hospital, told me that every week he had to deal with at least two cases of stabbing from within the Tibetan community, which at that time numbered about 2,000. Occasionally the stabbings were fatal.

In my experience Tibetan Buddhists are thus quite a fierce people, quite rough at the edges, so to speak. Indians are rather more gentle and refined. Even those leading a materially simple rural existence are often more truly cultured than many Westerners. Tibetans, by comparison, I found to be on the whole rather unpolished, though members of the Lhasa aristocracy could be very sophisticated indeed.

When Indian Buddhism came to Tibet, it therefore encountered a completely different culture and way of life. Of course, when the Buddha gained Enlightenment, he rose above all distinctions of race and nationality. What he had reached, what he had realized, was something purely spiritual, something transcendental. Historically speaking, however, Buddhism is a product of markedly Indian origin, reflecting Indian modes of thought, Indian cultural attitudes and assumptions. For instance, when we read Indian Buddhist texts, especially the great Mahayana sutras, we encounter the characteristically Indian tendency to exaggerate. If a story is being told, say about a woman who had so many children, the story might begin by saying that she had a dozen children; but then, not content to leave it at that, the author will go on to say that she had twenty children, or even fifty or a hundred. This kind of exaggeration is typically Indian.

In view of the vast differences between the Indian and Tibetan people, and the fact that after fifteen hundred years in India Buddhism possessed many typically Indian characteristics, one might have thought that Indian Buddhism was the last religion the Tibetans would choose to adopt. But, strange as it may seem, they did choose it. It took them, however, a very long time, a fact which is not always appreciated. It was not that one day someone went from India to Tibet and preached Buddhism, and then a few years later the Tibetans were all Buddhists. The Tibetans, especially the Tibetan nobles, put up considerable resistance, and the establishment of Buddhism as the religion of Tibet was a long and sometimes difficult process.

Perhaps we in the West can derive some comfort from this. We might think that things here are moving pretty slowly. Buddhism has been known in the West for about a century, yet we do not seem to have got very far with it. But in the case of Tibet it took very much longer. In fact the mere introduction of Buddhism into Tibet took approximately 500 years - much longer than it took, for example, to introduce Christianity into Britain. The 500 year period in question, from the seventh to the eleventh centuries CE, was a time of constant political upheaval. This was no coincidence, much of the upheaval being directly connected with the introduction of Buddhism.

In the East at that time - as in the West - the predominant form of government was absolute monarchy. (Throughout the East, wherever Buddhism spread, it did so under the patronage of powerful kings.) This is true of India, where Buddhism was given a great impetus by the emperor Asoka, it is true of China and Japan, and it is also true of Tibet. The introduction of Buddhism into Tibet was associated particularly with four dharmarajas, or religious kings, and with the Buddhist monks and scholars, both Indian and Tibetan, with whom these kings collaborated. The first three of these kings ruled over the whole of Tibet, and the fourth was a king of western Tibet after the country had split up into a number of independent states.

The first religious king of Tibet was Songtsen Gampo, who ruled in the seventh century, and seems to have been a remarkable man. His earliest achievement consisted in continuing the political and administrative reforms initiated by his father. Until that time, Tibet had been split into a number of different feudal principalities, but Songtsen Gampo - and his father before him - gradually brought them all together, centralizing the administration and establishing Tibet as a single political unit with a military power which was greatly feared by all her neighbours.

This was itself a great achievement, but it was not enough for Songtsen Gampo. At that time Tibet was surrounded by a number of highly civilized states: Khotan to the north-west; Kashmir (then an independent kingdom) to the west; Nepal to the south-west (and beyond Nepal, of course, India); and the great empire of China, then under the T'ang emperors, to the east. All these states were Buddhist in those days, and all of them had attained a very high level of civilization and culture. Songtsen Gampo could not help noticing this. He saw that although Tibet was politically united and in military terms a force to be reckoned with, where civilization and culture were concerned she very much lagged behind all her neighbours.

So Songtsen Gampo embarked on a programme of social reform and cultural development. First he redistributed the land that was in the possession of the nobles and great landowners, to give the common people a bigger and better share. At the same time he encouraged agriculture, trying to persuade the wandering nomadic tribes to settle down and cultivate the soil. He introduced weaving, masonry, and carpentry. He also decided to prohibit blood sports, a step which hints at the beginnings of his sympathy with Buddhism. Another old custom he prohibited was that of face-painting. Apparently Tibetans, men and women alike, had a custom of painting their faces bright red, but Songtsen Gampo outlawed this, thinking it rather uncivilized.

In the course of his travels and military campaigns Songtsen Gampo had observed that the culture of the surrounding countries was very closely linked with Buddhism, and this led him to decide that Buddhism should be introduced in Tibet. He was supported in this mission by his two principal wives, the daughter of the king of Nepal, and the daughter of the emperor of China. What might have happened if the king's wives had followed religions other than Buddhism is an open question, but fortunately both were devout Buddhists. In Tibetan art they are often depicted on either side of Songtsen Gampo.

For his Nepalese wife, Songtsen Gampo built the Jokhang, literally 'Lord's House', in Lhasa. European writers often call it the 'Cathedral of Lhasa'. It is the oldest religious building in the Tibetan capital, and the one the Tibetans consider the most sacred. For his Chinese wife he built a smaller temple known as the Ramoche. In these temples were installed images of Aksobhya and Sakyamuni brought from their respective countries by his wives. The temples were desecrated and demolished by the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution. Devout Tibetans later surreptitiously removed the battered heads of these two great images, which had been there for

thirteen centuries, and brought them to India, where they presented them to the Dalai Lama. They were made of a sort of painted stucco, quite easily damaged, and I remember that many Indians were deeply affected by the photographs of them in the newspapers.

During the course of his reign, Songtsen Gampo built many other temples, the first Buddhist temples to be built in Tibet. He also sent a group of young Tibetans to study Buddhism in Kashmir, which in those days had a reputation for Buddhist learning. But such were the rigours of the climate (Kashmir being decidedly hot compared to Tibet, even though it is cool compared to the rest of India) that only one of the party survived to return to Tibet. This was the celebrated Tonmi Sambhota, who invented the Tibetan alphabet in around 632CE. Before that time the Tibetans had no script and therefore, of course, no literature. Tonmi Sambhota devised the Tibetan alphabet on the basis of one of the Indian scripts, probably the Sharada script, with which he had become familiar during his sojourn in Kashmir, and the first Tibetan translations of Indian Buddhist scriptures began to be made. According to tradition, the very first text to be translated was the Mani Kabum. Mani here refers to the om mani padme hum mantra, and kabum means 100,000 words, the text being a sort of encyclopaedia about the mantra - how it originated, what it means, how it should be recited, and so on. Paper and ink for printing were also introduced from China at this time, as well as painting and sculpture.

Thus Songtsen Gampo practically created Tibetan culture, at least in its rudimentary form. Furthermore, he caused a new code of civil law to be drafted, and he ensured that the ethical precepts of Buddhism were widely taught throughout his domain. But as yet there were no Buddhist monks or monasteries in Tibet. In fact, Songtsen Gampo's interest in Buddhism appears to have been more cultural than religious. This was inevitable, given the state of Tibet in those days. The spiritual life can develop only when a certain standard of culture - in the sense not of material improvement but of the refinement of one's whole way of life - has been attained. But, even with this very important reservation, Songtsen Gampo's work remains of the first importance. He laid the foundations of the Tibetan nation, of its culture and literature, and of Tibetan Buddhism itself - surely a very considerable achievement for one man. The Tibetans show their gratitude to Songtsen Gampo even to this day by regarding him as a manifestation of the great Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokitesvara (the Dalai Lama being another, later, one).

Songtsen Gampo's work did not come to an end when he died. More and more texts were translated from Indian languages into Tibetan. Monks started coming from neighbouring countries, including refugees from Khotan where Buddhists were being persecuted, and even put to the sword, by the Muslim hordes that were beginning to sweep across Central Asia. At the same time, there was growing opposition to Buddhism in Tibet itself amongst the followers of the indigenous religion, Bon. This opposition stemmed mainly from noble families who resented the growing power and prestige of the Buddhist monarchy, and also the Bon priests who no doubt felt that their livelihood was under threat.

The second religious king of Tibet, Trisong Detsen, lived in the eighth century. He was an ardent supporter of Buddhism, but during the earlier part of his reign he was greatly hampered by the hostility of the followers of Bon. He invited to Tibet the Indian scholar and teacher Santaraksita, best known nowadays as the author of a great work of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy called the Tattvasangraha. But unfortunately Santaraksita's mission was not very successful. He visited several places, he spoke on Buddhism, he gave a number of lectures, but then apparently an epidemic broke out all over the country. This gave the Bonists the opportunity they had been waiting for. They said, 'You see what happens. In comes this Indian Buddhist teacher, and there

is an epidemic! The demons are angry.' Santaraksita could find no answer for this, and knew another approach was needed. He advised the king to invite to Tibet the great Indian master Padmasambhava, who was then living at Nalanda University near Bodh Gaya.

Padmasambhava is one of the most remarkable figures in the entire history of Buddhism. Not only was he a great scholar and an accomplished debater and philosopher; he was also a formidable yogi, a great meditator, and a mystic. He was a great master of the occult sciences, and according to tradition he was also a magician to be reckoned with. He spent only eighteen months in Tibet, but during that time he brought the Bon 'demons' under control. Tradition tells us that he incorporated the lot of them, willy-nilly, into the Tantric Buddhist pantheon, converting them into guardian deities of the Buddhist faith.

We should not dismiss stories of this kind as mere legendary accretions to the historical facts. The story has a profound psychological and spiritual significance. After all, what is Bon? What does it represent? Broadly speaking, it is the indigenous shamanistic religion of Tibet, and like all forms of shamanism it is very closely connected with the psyche of the people practising it. One may go so far as to say that the Bon deities or 'demons' are in a sense archetypes of the Tibetan collective unconscious. Thus their hostility to Buddhism, in the traditional account, can be said to represent the unconscious resistance of the Tibetan psyche to the higher and more spiritual ideals of Buddhism. The Tibetans could not take them in all at once. The Tibetan mind was, after all, very different from the Indian mind. It therefore put up resistance, and this is symbolized on the archetypal level by the resistance and hostility of the Bon deities who created the epidemic.

Santaraksita was a very great man, but he had his limitations. As a scholar, a philosopher, he could appeal to the conscious mind of the Tibetans, but he did not have the resources to overcome their unconscious resistance to Buddhist ideals. Padmasambhava, on the other hand, was not just a great scholar, not just an eminent philosopher; he was also a yogi and mystic, which meant that he could break through to a deeper level and make contact with the forces operating within the Tibetan collective unconscious. He was able to incorporate the Bon deities and the forces they represented into the framework of Buddhism, and even to use the energy contained in these archetypes in the interests of the spiritual life.

The Bon demons having been 'converted', Padmasambhava and Santaraksita together founded the first monastery in Tibet, Samye, in 779CE. Built after the model of the famous Odantapuri Monastery in India, Samye was completed in the year 787CE. Much of it was recently destroyed by the Chinese, but a film of it made by the Indian representative in Lhasa before the desecration shows that it was a very beautiful place, reminiscent of what the great ancient Indian monastic universities must have looked like in their heyday. Santaraksita and Padmasambhava also ordained seven Tibetans as monks, thus founding the Tibetan monastic Sangha.

Padmasambhava left a permanent mark on Tibetan Buddhism, through the sheer force of his personality. Although he only stayed in Tibet for about eighteen months, the Tibetan accounts of his visit usually make out that it lasted for thirty-five years, presumably because he created such an impact in those eighteen months that it was as though he had been there for thirty-five years. He is traditionally regarded as the founder of the Nyingma School, but he is greatly revered by the followers of all sects and schools of Tibetan Buddhism. If you go into practically any Tibetan Buddhist temple you will see an image or picture of the great guru Padmasambhava.

It is a very distinctive image, so much so that one can readily believe it represents him as he appeared in life, because the details are always the same. He is a tall well-built Indian, in the prime of life, with the faintly Mongoloid features characteristic of the people of East Bengal. He has a drooping moustache and a little beard, and a hint of ferocity in his expression. He is dressed in princely robes and wears a lotus cap with a vulture's feather on the top. Sometimes he carries a skull-cup filled with blood, sometimes a dagger, and sometimes the dorje, the diamond-thunderbolt. In the crook of his arm is a staff surmounted by three skulls. The images convey an impression of a remarkable figure, a supremely lively, virile, active, and powerful person. You can't mistake Padmasambhava for anyone else.

Another highly significant event during Trisong Detsen's reign was what Western scholars usually call the 'Council of Lhasa', although it was in fact more of a debate than a council, and it took place at Samye. The debate was between Kamalasila, one of Santaraksita's Indian disciples, and a Chinese monk who had turned up in Tibet and was preaching Ch'an (the Chinese forerunner of Japanese Zen) to the disapproval of some Tibetan Buddhists. So in 792CE a discussion was arranged between Kamalasila and the Ch'an monk. We still have detailed records of this event, and the chief point of contention, apparently, was over the question of whether Enlightenment came gradually, little by little, or occurred all at once, in a great rush. Following the general Indian tradition, the Indian scholar held that it came gradually, step by step, by following the Eightfold Path, practising the ten paramitas, and so on; while the Chinese monk argued that it happened all at once.

The debate was adjudicated by King Trisong Detsen, and he decided in favour of Kamalasila. However, those who have studied the records believe that the Chinese Ch'an master did pretty well too. Looking at it quite objectively and impartially, one might say that the point at issue between them is really a distinction without a difference. One does not attain Enlightenment either slowly or quickly; ultimately the question of time does not come into it at all. But the king said that Kamalasila had won, and that was that.

Trisong Detsen further decreed that from then on Tibetan Buddhists should follow the Sarvastivada School (one of the main Hinayana schools) with respect to vinaya or religious discipline, the Madhyamika and Yogacara Schools of the Mahayana for their philosophy and metaphysics, and the Tantra, the Vajrayana, as far as meditation was concerned. In this way a synthesis of the three yantras was established. These three aspects of practice were also conceived of as constituting successive stages of the spiritual path. First you follow Sarvastivada discipline, then you study Madhyamika and Yogacara philosophy, and then you practise Tantric meditation; in this way your spiritual life is complete. Thus the reign of Trisong Detsen saw three main developments: interest in Buddhism shifted from the cultural to the religious; the monastic order was established; and the triyana character of Tibetan Buddhism was determined.

The third religious king of Tibet was Ralpachen, who reigned in the ninth century. He was an even more ardent Buddhist than Trisong Detsen, and did a great deal for the propagation of Buddhism. He established more temples and monasteries, he encouraged Buddhist arts and crafts, and perhaps most important of all, he set up a permanent commission for the translation of the scriptures. This meant that you could not just learn Sanskrit if you felt like it and translate a Buddhist text into Tibetan; you had to get permission from this commission, which laid down rules of translation. It compiled a glossary (which still exists) of Buddhist terms in Sanskrit and Tibetan, and in this way the translation of Buddhist scriptures into Tibetan was made regular and uniform. For example, the commission decided that the Sanskrit word 'Dharma' was to be

translated chos, and nobody was allowed to translate it any other way. This decision meant that the Tibetans did not come up against the sort of obstacle which English-speaking students of Buddhism have to deal with. When you read chos in a Tibetan text you know that it means 'Dharma'; but in English translations Dharma is sometimes translated as 'Law', sometimes as 'Doctrine', sometimes as 'Truth', sometimes as 'Norm'. Beginners hardly know where they are, because the same word is rendered in so many different ways by different translators. By compiling a glossary which everyone had to follow, the Tibetan commission prevented this sort of confusion, thus making way for the effective study of Buddhism.

Unfortunately, in the midst of these advances, King Ralpachen was assassinated as a result of a Bon conspiracy, and was succeeded, in 836CE, by his brother Langdarma, who was completely opposed to Buddhism. A period of persecution ensued. Buddhist temples and monasteries were demolished, monks were killed or driven out, scriptures were destroyed, and the result was that Buddhism practically perished in Tibet, especially in central Tibet, for nearly two centuries. Only a few faithful followers kept the flame of the Dharma alive in those dark days.

It was a time of great political upheaval, and eventually the country broke up into a number of different states. It was also a period of religious confusion. Hindu Tantric teachers infiltrated Tibet from Kashmir with some very questionable practices that began to give the Tantra a bad name. Even Buddhism itself, as much of it as had survived in Tibet, became more and more debased and corrupt, and this was a source of serious concern to a number of earnest Buddhists. When things quietened down a little they decided, under the protection of the fourth religious king, Yeshe O, to invite to Tibet the great teacher Atisa from Vikramasila, another of the great monastic universities of north-eastern India.

Yeshe O was king of western Tibet in the eleventh century. Buddhism had fared rather better here during the period of persecution, and Yeshe O did much, within the boundaries of his own kingdom, to revive and propagate it. He even took the step of becoming a monk himself. His fortunes then took an even more dramatic turn. Towards the end of his life he went on an expedition to collect from his subjects the huge quantity of gold needed to fetch Atisa from India. But in the course of his journey he was captured by a neighbouring Muslim king who gave him an ultimatum. He should either become a Muslim or be ransomed for his own weight in gold.

It was, of course, out of the question for Yeshe O to become a Muslim. But where was the ransom to come from? The king's nephew was very devoted to him and resolved to collect as much gold as he possibly could, but even in a gold-bearing country like Tibet it's not easy to collect the weight of a man in gold. Over the months, over the years, he gradually amassed a large quantity. But when he finally visited the king in the dungeon where he had been kept all those years, he found that he had only enough gold to weigh against his uncle's body, not against his head as well. So he said 'What shall I do? Shall I make a last effort to get more gold?' But the king said, 'I'm a very old man, and I have not yet had the opportunity to sacrifice my life for the Dharma. Don't bother about me any more. Don't give the gold to my captors. Use it instead to bring Atisa to Tibet.' So this was what was done, and when the Muslim king realized that no gold was going to be forthcoming, Yeshe O was murdered.

So Atisa, the greatest Buddhist teacher in India at that time, came to Tibet, and stayed there for twelve years, until his death. He worked hard and accomplished a great deal. He reformed the monastic discipline, he purified the practice of the Tantra, he laid the foundations for the Kadam School, and he wrote a number of works for the spiritual guidance of the Tibetans. Largely as a

result of Atisa's influence, there ensued a tremendous revival of Buddhism in Tibet. Before the end of the eleventh century Marpa and Milarepa had initiated the Kagyu lineage, and Konchok Gyelpo had founded the Sakya School. After so many struggles, ups and downs, reverses and successes, Buddhism was at last (by the time of the Norman conquest in England) finally established in Tibet. From then onwards it was never seriously challenged as the dominant religion until the invasion in the 1950s by communist China.