

HOW SAMTEN GYALTSEN CAME TO EUROPE

by
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The story begins with the offer of the Rockefeller Foundation to provide funds for an extensive programme of Tibetan research, calling upon the expertise of knowledgeable Tibetan scholars who had fled recently from Tibet to India and Nepal, following upon the flight of the Dalai Lama himself to India in 1959. Funds were offered for a three-year period to those universities which were already known to have a active interest in Tibetan studies, namely Seattle in the USA, London, Paris, Leiden, Rome, Bonn and Munich in Western Europe, and Tokyo in Japan. The choice of the Tibetans thus invited, was left to those responsible for Tibetan studies in these various universities, and funds were made available also for us to travel in search of the most interesting possibilities. In May 1960 I made an exploratory tour through northern India and Nepal, meeting others interested in the same scheme, notably Gene Smith from Seattle and Rolf Stein from Paris. As the result of such discussions, I gained the impression that academically it would be more valuable to establish a single research-centre in a suitable place in the Indian sub-continent (I suggested the Kathmandu Valley) rather than invite Tibetan scholars to our particular universities. None of the Tibetans, eventually invited, had any experience of life in our various countries, they had no knowledge of the relevant languages, and much time would be expended in helping them to adapt to this new life. Thus three years seemed a very short period for anything of academic use to emerge from the labours involved. However the Rockefeller Foundation would not agree to this alternative plan, arguing that the underlying intention was to encourage the permanent establishment of Tibetan studies in our various universities, for which the Foundation was merely providing an initial advance programme.

Since Tibet as a political entity was closed to foreigners by the Chinese authorities from 1950 to 1985, it remained inaccessible during my whole period of tenure at the University of London (1949-82). Thus I devoted my "Tibetan travels" to the more remote Himalayan regions, already known to be imbued with Tibetan culture and religion, namely from east to west: Bhutan and Sikkim, Solu-Khumbu and the whole Himalayan range, primarily Mustang and Dolpo, in Nepal, then Himachal Pradesh (India) and finally Ladakh (Kashmir). It was also in such areas that interesting Tibetan refugees might be met. Over the winter of 1960-61 I was making independently a return visit to Dolpo (where I had already been in 1956, see my *Himalayan Pilgrimage*). On this second journey with my companion Pasang Khambache Sherpa (died 1996) we were staying in December 1960 in Tarap, about one

month's trek across the mountains from the small airport at Pokhara (central Nepal), when I heard that the Abbot of Yungdrung Monastery (Central Tibet) was staying nearby on his return journey from the Monastery of Samling (Dolpo). Like other studious Tibetan men of religion who had recently fled from Chinese-occupied Tibet, he was looking for block-prints and manuscripts in small monasteries in these regions of Tibetan culture which remained outside of political Tibet. He was accompanied by a young refugee monk named Sangye Tenzin, who had come up from India to assist him, and they were on their way back to Delhi in order to make reprints of all the books which they had borrowed en route. We met at my camp the following day. I had visited such small local Bon monasteries in my earlier travels in these regions, but this was my first contact with a Grand Lama of an important Bonpo establishment in Tibet itself (see my *Asian Commitment*, pp.168-9). This meeting came about just when I was looking out for possible educated Tibetans to invite to London within terms of the Rockefeller project and it occurred to me at once what an original idea it might be to invite Bonpo monks rather than regular Buddhist ones. Who then in the non-Tibetan world knew anything reliable about Bonpo religion? Regarding the Grand Lama of Yungdrung as too advanced in years, I decided at once to invite his younger companion Sangye Tenzin, and thus arranged to meet him on my return from Dolpo in early summer 1961. He named a small Bonpo gompa (monastery) on the outskirts of the Kathmandu Valley as our place of future contact. He left at once with the abbot on the long trek down to Pokhara and thence to Delhi, while I continued my tour into Dolpo with Pasang. Returning to the Kathmandu Valley at the end of March, "my first thought was to find Sangye Tenzin, who had agreed to meet me in Kathmandu, but when I went to the small 'gomba' on the edge of the Valley, designated as our meeting place, he was not there. Instead I met an older Tibetan Bonpo lama, named Tenzin Namdak from Kham (Eastern Tibet), who also impressed me by his learning, his cordiality and his cheerful good humour. He kindly advised me where Sangye Tenzin might be found in Delhi" (quoted from my *Asian Commitment* page 191). A few days later I was in New Delhi visiting the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, where certificates of identity (in the absence of passports) would have to be issued for any Tibetans who accompanied me to London, and to the British High Commission, where visas would have to be attached. Then with the help of Pasang Khambache I tracked down Sangye Tenzin at the address given by Tenzin Namdak at a printing-business in Old Delhi. Once again he was not there, having gone on pilgrimage (probably also to look for books) to the Riwalsar Lake, famous in the Padmasambhava legend (see my *Himalayan Pilgrimage* pp.173-4), "but we found his younger companion Samten Gyaltzen, who impressed us very much indeed. By their own efforts these two are collecting all the Bonpo texts they can find, rewriting them where necessary and having them printed here in Delhi. The funds for doing this, they collect by their own efforts" (extract from a personal letter, dated 16 April 61). So

this is how Samten, together with Sangye Tenzin and Tenzin Namdak entered my short list as the three Bonpo monks who accompanied me to London later that year 1961, once all the formalities had been completed. These included their presentation to the Dalai Lama, as well as the documentation referred to above. For all documentation purposes family-names were needed (and these most Tibetans lack), so I suggested that Sangye Tenzin and Samten Gyeltsen add their local village-names in Amdo as their respective "family names"(it may be noted in passing that the region of Amdo was already under vague Chinese administration before the occupation of 1950, and that the Dalai Lama's *dGe-lugs-pa* administration extended no further eastwards than the province of Kham.) Thus on all their subsequent documentation the surnames Jongdong and Karmay appear. My final list of Tibetan refugees who were willing to accompany me into a different world, entirely unknown to them personally, came to five, since they included also a young aristocrat from Lhasa, named Sonam Panden Trangjun, and a simple Tibetan monk, named Lhakpa, originally from Sera Monastery in Lhasa.

On an earlier visit to India and Nepal in 1960 when the Rockefeller offer had just been made, Pasang and I happened to meet in Kathmandu a hapless Tibetan refugee with an unusual problem. Sonam Panden Trangjun (in this case a genuine surname deriving from the family-estate) told us that his whole family had been killed in Lhasa during the 1959 uprising, with the exception of his elder sister, who was married to the eldest son of the Râja of Lo (Mustang). Having arrived in India as a refugee, he was now on his way up to Mustang to make contact with her. Thanks to our official contacts we were able to assist him in obtaining some form of documentation and also a travel pass. The problems which these Tibetan refugees suffered when attempting any independent travel could be considerable. Clearly they carried no original identity document issued in Tibet and until they were eventually given Indian Identity Documents, rather scrappy affairs, often with miswritten names and usually of short duration, they had no means of self-identification when confronted by frontier-police or check-post officials. We told Sonam Panden of our plan to visit Dolpo over the coming winter, expressing the hope that we would be able to remake contact there. In the meantime he made the journey up the Kali Gandhaki Valley to Mustang and met us again on my return to India for my winter visit to Dolpo (1960-61). He was also very helpful in our preliminary meetings with the Dalai Lama (April-May 61) in Dharamsala near Dehra Dun, where we went to explain my plan of inviting three Bonpo monks to London. As noted above, he was also helpful during my research-tour in Dolpo 1960-61, joining me there directly from Mustang. Later we both assisted his sister from Mustang (Lo) down to Kathmandu, where she finally settled.

The "fighting monk" Lhakpa was a very different case. Having lost a leg soon after his flight, he approached me when I was on a visit to the Indian-run refugee settlement at Dalhousie (a well known Himala-

yan resort in the old British days). He asked if I could obtain for him an artificial limb. At that time this could only be done satisfactorily by accepting full responsibility for him and eventually taking him back to England. (His only given name was Lhakpa, meaning Wednesday, but I prefixed this by the name Tashi, meaning Good Fortune, and added the "surname" Khedrup from his village near Lhasa. For his life-story see Hugh E. Richardson, *Adventures of a Tibetan fighting monk*, Tamarind Press, Bangkok 1986.) Neither of these two Tibetan laymen survived the loss of the only way of life, the Tibetan way, which they knew so well and which was natural to them (see below). The three monks, so much more self-assured and resilient, are all alive and happy today.

Before starting the journey to the West, we spent a few weeks together in the frontier town of Kalimpong, in British times the beginning of the old route from India into Central Tibet, then easily reached by rail from Calcutta where we would start our air-journey to Europe. Here I started some lessons in English and in world-geography and bought them all European style clothes, which they wanted to have so as not to be so conspicuous in their new setting. I especially wanted them to realize that there were other Buddhist monks in the world beside Tibetan ones. Thus we broke our journey in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to visit Theravadin sites, notably the ancient capitals of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa and the Buddha tooth-relic at Kandy. We then travelled via Beirut (solely for historical / geographical reasons) to Rome, where I wanted them to meet my revered master Giuseppe Tucci (d. 1984), and also so that they could meet the important Lama of The Old Tibetan Religious Order, namely Namkha'i Norbu, whom Tucci had just then invited under the same Rockefeller scheme.

Arriving in England, we stayed first in my own house in Berkhamsted until I found a large apartment in London itself. The three monks rapidly accustomed themselves to this entirely new life of study, but during the first year little of academic value was accomplished, and I had problems with our aristocratic layman Sonam Panden who did not fit in at all with the others. Apart from general study, especially of English, I encouraged them to make other useful contacts as wide as was practicable. We kept in touch with other groups of Tibetans elsewhere in Europe. Thus a young lady-student in the anthropological department of the School of Oriental Studies took Sonam Panden on a visit to Switzerland where they might meet other Tibetans in various refugee settlements. Samten, accompanied by Pasang, made a visit to Paris, where they met Professor Rolf Stein and the small group of Tibetans established at La Chapelle Vieil Forêt. He also accompanied me to Dublin where I was invited by Sir Chester Beatty to catalogue the Tibetan collection in his private library. Sangye Tenzin stayed in Oxford for a while with a young Englishman who at that time was preparing for a Ph.D. in Tibetan (regrettably never completed), and later with Professor Per Kvaene in Copenhagen. Soon after their arrival a young friend of mine (Peter Cuming) took them on a visit to Mount St. Bernard Monastery near Leicester with its 30 monks. This impressed

them greatly for they realized that monastic life also existed in Europe. On a holiday tour of Scotland we stayed on another occasion at the Benedictine monastery of St Augustus by Loch Ness. The mountainous setting and the monastic life there pleased them greatly and our Bonpo monks made later visits there on their own volition. It is interesting to note that Sangye Tenzin incorporated certain “western” practices in his “rule” for monks) in the settlement which they founded near Solon (Himachal Pradesh, India) on their return to India. (See below.) E.g. instead of tea and food being served to the monks in the actual temple during a religious ceremony, which is the normal Tibetan practice, he insisted on building a separate dining hall (refectory); he established set daily periods for study and for work around the monastery grounds.

Sonam Panden, so active and helpful when we were in India and Nepal together, became sad and listless soon after his arrival in England. The visit to Switzerland mentioned above, helped in no way at all and within a year he returned to the Dalai Lama’s entourage in Dharamsala. Finally in June 65 I met him quite by chance in a Tibetan refugee settlement in Switzerland (Mönchwillen). He seemed pleased to see Lhakpa and myself, but spoke very little, even in Tibetan. The Swiss lady in charge, having no means of communication with him, was surprised that we knew him and asked my advice in his regard. Later he returned to Dharamsala and died there soon afterwards like one of broken heart (see my *Asian Commitment*, page 201).

The case of our other layman Lhakpa (name in full on his documentation Tashi Lhakpa Khedrup) was first more hopeful but remained personally unfulfilled. He mastered English adequately, and as soon as he was fitted with a properly made artificial limb and had learned to drive an adapted motor-car, he was very helpful in the general running of house in Berkhamsted and the apartment in London. When the 3-year period ended, he stayed on with me as my personal assistant. Lest he felt lonely I encouraged him to meet other Tibetans as much as possible. In England he seemed always welcome at the refugee centre, known as the Ockenden Venture, run by a very kind lady, Joyce Pierce (now deceased) at Woking near London. However she complained to me that he was all too generous in taking the boys out to beer-drinking in “public houses” (beer parlours). Despite my remonstrances he continued to spend all his money in the same way. Finally he was caught twice by the police for “drunken driving” and this put an end to his driving ability, restricting his life accordingly. Apart from the visit to Switzerland, mentioned just above, he accompanied me to India in 1967. He could not fairly be left there, since by that time he had a British passport and still remained my personal responsibility. He died of natural causes in 1986 (probably a heart-attack resulting from high blood-pressure), when he was staying with another benefactor on the Isle of Man.

These stories of non-fulfilment are recounted only as contrast to the extraordinary success in the case of the three Bonpo monks. Apart from

reading and travelling for his own benefit, Samten assisted me with my own work, notably with the final text of *The Nine Ways of Bon*, selections edited and translated in co-operation with Tenzin Namdak, and also with the production of my *Four Lamas of Dolpo*. The intention of the Rockefeller Grant was that these visits should lead to a flourishing development of Tibetan research in our various universities. Samten has certainly achieved this in Paris thanks to his personal attainment of world-wide scholarship. At the end of the 3-year grant in 1964, he elected to stay on with me in London, but later when Professor Rolf Stein invited him to Paris, I urged him to accept these improved prospects. At the same time I was still concerned with the immediate fortunes of Sangye Tenzin and Tenzin Namdak. Both wanted to return to India, Tenzin Namdak was interested in building up an ever larger collection of Bonpo literature, now that so much appeared to have been lost in Chinese-occupied Tibet, while Sangye Tenzin had hopes of founding a Bonpo centre for laymen and monks in some suitable place in the Himalayas. Within a few years this was achieved thanks to a grant of land near Solan in Himachal Pradesh and also thanks to a generous grant from Catholic Relief Services (India). Happily Tenzin Namdak joined him in this very successful project, but later parted from him in order to found his own monastic settlement on the edge of the Kathmandu Valley. Since 1985 when the Chinese authorities have opened Tibet to foreign tourists, it has also become possible for Tibetans resident to India to make visits so long as they have no direct connection with the Dalai Lama. Maybe Samten Gyaltzen Karmay and Sangye Tenzin Jongdong are specially favoured as they come originally from Amdo, which as mentioned above, was not treated even before 1950 as politically part of Tibet. I note that on a visit to Tibet in 1995 Sangye Tenzin was consecrated as Grand Abbot of the reconstructed Bonpo Monastery of sMan-ri in Central Tibet. However with this imposing title he continues to reside at the Bonpo settlement near Solan (India). Famous and not so famous Tibetan lamas who arrive in the western world usually become the centre of a group of western Buddhists. Very few, perhaps only these two, have returned to India or Nepal, to further the cause of their own people, and only one simple Tibetan monk has become an outstanding world-wide scholar in a western world. Congratulations to Samten!

