BUDDHISM AND TIBETOLOGY

—Marianne Winder

Buddhism, otherwise called 'Dharma' in Sanskrit, 'Dhamma' in Pali and 'Chhos' in Tibetan, has been existing since the time of the Buddha Gautama in the 6th century B.C. Tibetology, that is, the various disciplines dealing with Tibet, and its neighbours, as such, is a young subject of study. It includes work on the Tibetan language—classical and collequial and dialects, Tibetan literature, the geography of Tibet and its neighbours, history, painting, architecture, music, medicine, astronomy and astrology and anthropology. Most of those subjects cannot be studied in isolation because some of them are connected with the Sanskrit tradition in India and other traditions, as for instance medicine which has spread to the Mongolian cultural environment. Few anthropologists have been able to work in Tibet itself, and instead they have made special studies of regions like Ladakh, Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan, with their languages and customs. All of these subjects are in some way connected with religion, Bon or Buddhist, because of the special political and historical circumstances of Tibet. The head of the government has always been also the head of religious affairs, namely the Dalai Lama in his successive reincarnations. Every new Dalai Lama found as a little boy according to indications by his former Incarnation and the State Oracle, has had the Panchen Lama, Incumbent of Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse, if there was an elder one, as his preceptor, and every Panchen Lama, when found in a similar manner, has had the Dalai Lama, if there was an elder one, as his preceptor.

Much of the Bon religion has been amalgamated in some way with the Buddhist religion, Buddhists having taken over Bon rituals and Bon having imitated Buddhist customs in a somewhat altered form. Anybody who wishes to study Tibetology is, therefore, obliged to study Buddhism as well. Religion as a subject of study may acquaint the student with a philosophical background, the answer to certain metaphysical questions, a system of ethics and the observation of certain rituals. In the case of Buddhism it will not acquaint him with the actual effect of the religion on a person's mind and body. Unless Buddhism and Budhist meditation is practised in daily life its effects cannot be experienced and therefore not be known. Theoretical knowledge will not be a substitute.

The question is: As a real knowledge of Buddhism can only be acquired by practising it, and Tibetology involves a knowledge of Buddhism, should every Tibetologist be a Buddhist ?

Looking at the evidence from history we find that the first people in the West who reported on the customs and beliefs of the Tibetans were the Flemish Friar William Rubruck of 1253, the Venetian trader Marco Polo of 1275, and the Franciscan ascetic Odorico of Pordenone of 1285 who came to Karakorum but perhaps not to Tibet although he says he did while using orally transmitted travellers' tales. He says Lhasa was built with walls of black and white and all its streets were well paved. After reports from two members of the Christian clergy and one trader, there was a gap of about three hundred years before the Jesuits first tried to find Christian communities preserved in the East and when they found the Tibetans were Buddhists, tried to convert them to Christianity. Because of this and their inability to listen to the other point of view they usually had to leave the Tibetan court or monastery after a short time. Jesuits came to Tibet during 16th, 17th and 18th century and usually wrote diaries about their stay. In the 18th century the Capuchins came and were even allowed to build a church, probably on account of their medical skills. Their diaries, too, were biassed towards the Christian point of view. The next trader after Marco Polo was George Bogle in 1774 who came on behalf of the East India Company. He was instructed to keep a diary abaut the views and customs of the Tibetans so that the Company would buy their wares. After him, another member of the Company, Samuel Turner, came to Tibet in 1783. The account of his stay was published in 1800. Thomas Manning, another member of the East India Company, penetrated to Lhasa in 1811. His diary is less on geographical features and more on personal observations. In the 1840ies the French missionaries, Evarist Huc and Joseph Gabet, spent two months in Tibet and described their stay in a subsequent book. The next travellers during the 19th century wrote reports for London to clarify the political situation, that is, the claims of China and Russia on Tibetan territories. They were Moorcroft, Kintup and others.

The only man writing during the 19th century who possibly became a Buddhist was the Hungarian Csoma de Koros. He walked on foot from Budapest to Ladakh and Zanskar in order to find what he believed to be the Asian origins of the Hungarians in Central Asia. He learned the Tibetan language and spent years of a frugal and ascetic life in Tibetan monasteries. In 1834 he published the first Tibetan-English dictionary and the first Tibetan grammar not written in Tibetan. He published an analysis of the Kanjur and a table of contents of the medical classic, the **rGyud-bzhi**. H.A. Jaschke, the author of the most frequently used dictionary of 1881 belonged to the Moravian sect of Christianity. He leaves the reader in no doubt about his views on Buddhism, and the explanations he gives of religious terms are intensely mirthprovoking. The other author of a Tibetan-English dictionary, Sarat Chandra Das, was a Bengali schoolmaster who wrote **A narrative of a journey to Lhasa**

which took place in 1881.

The next period is one of translations of Tibetan Buddhist writings into European languages; those of I.J. Schmidt, Anton Schiefner, Alfred Grunwedel and Leon Feer. S.F. Oldenbourg brought out a series called **Bibliotheca Buddhica** in Leningrad, then St. Petersburg, starting in 1897. Before the turn of the century L.A. Waddell published **The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism,** in 1895. This is an unparalleled collection of details on the rituals and customs of Tibetan Buddhism, factually mostly accurate, but the interpretation distorted by the prejudices of a Christian medical man who may well have contemplated the idea of becoming a medical missionary. Lt. Colonel Waddell was the Medical Officer in charge of the Younghusband Expedition in 1904. The terminology in his book is confusing because he calls the gods 'devils', just to give an example.

During the 20th century the subject of Tibetology became a regular part of University curricula in Europe and America. There are rare instances where Tibetans themselves have published scholarly works in the West, for instance Rechung Rinpoche's **Tibetan medicine illustrated in original texts** in 1973. In many cases Tibetans have remained anonymous and have helped western scholars with their work, bringing to it the oral and written tradition they are familiar with. Chogyam Trungpa published together with the Nalanda Translation Committee of Boulder, Colorado, a translation of the **Life of Marpa the Translator** in 1982. To have a committee is a good idea if it ensures that western standards of scholarship are applied because the priorities in eastern and western scholarship are different. Accuracy of transliteration, translation and quotation is extremely important in the West while bringing out the spiritual significance is the prime objective in the East. The latter is, of course, also important in the West but it is maintained that this can only be really achieved when accuracy has been employed throughout because otherwise unintentional misinterpretation can occur.

Western Tibetologists are not always aware that, lacking experience within the tradition, they can make the most appalling mistakes in the interpretation of coded passages. This could be avoided if a knowledgeable Lama or Tulku could be in every case consulted, provided it was being realised that there was a difficult passage. In 9th to 12th century Tibet, Tibetan translators usually collaborated with Indian experts on Mahayana Buddhism, when they were translating from Sanskrit into Tibetan. Both the Sanskrit and the Tibetan experts were practising Buddhists who are thoroughly acquainted with their subject. How much

more necessary is collaboration in the case of western scholars who are new to the tradition if they have become part of it at all. Therefore either the collaboration of one western Tibetologist who brings to it the skill of western scholarship as a tool for comparing versions and comparing manuscripts, translating accurately, and giving references in a consistent, space-saving and intelligible way, and one Tibetan, an accredited expert in his field, is desirable, or else a committee of several individuals, preferably including at least one with academic qualifications.