

## *Religion, Education and the Role of Government in Old Tibet*

Daniel Perdue, Virginia Commonwealth University, US

---

### **ABSTRACT**

In speaking of “old Tibet” I mean to refer to Tibet prior to the Tibetan diaspora of 1959 or most certainly to the Tibet that was prior to the invasion by the Communist Chinese in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In old Tibet, to a great extent, all education was religious education. Tibetans say of themselves that prior to the arrival of Buddhism in their country, beginning perhaps as early as the 600’s of the Common Era, the Tibetan people were barbarians. Mostly nomadic herders, the Tibetans did not have a written language. Then, when the Tibetans began to adopt Buddhism from India, they created a script modeled on the Sanskrit alphabet. Subsequently, over a period of about three hundred years before Buddhism was wiped out in India by the Muslim Mughals from Persia, the Tibetan government and wealthy Tibetans undertook to translate the Buddhist literature of India, both the word of the Buddha and the commentarial tradition, that the Indians had amassed in more than a millennium since the time of the Buddha. Thus, from the beginning of Buddhism in Tibet and for well over a millennium since, the Tibetan government has been keenly involved in both religion and education. So we see in the case of old Tibet a real bonding of religion, education, and the role of government. The power and money of Tibet were put into the monasteries, and the monasteries were the main providers of education.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In speaking of “old Tibet,” this paper refers at least to the Tibet that existed prior to the Tibetan diaspora of 1959 or most certainly to the Tibet that existed prior to the invasion by the Communist Chinese in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In old Tibet, almost all the people were Buddhist, to a great extent all education was religious education, and the government was headed up by a series of “religious kings” who then gave way to a “theocracy” headed up by the Dalai Lamas. The case of old Tibet presents an interesting study of the bonding of religion, education and government that lasted over a period of more than twelve centuries.

### **HISTORY**

The Tibetans say of themselves that prior to the arrival of Buddhism in their country, they were “barbarians.” Though Tibet has always been sparsely populated and the people are mostly nomadic herders, the Tibetans waged a series of military incursions on its neighbors in Central Asia in the early part of the sixth century. Beginning in 635 CE the Tibetans attacked China and eventually all of Kansu and vast regions of Szechuan and northern Yunnan.<sup>1</sup> In time the Tibetans received

---

<sup>1</sup> See for instance John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), pages 125 ff

Buddhism and gave up military undertakings. “The first successful transmission of Buddhism into Tibet occurred during the reign of Songtsen Gampo (ca. 618-650), who later was recognized as the first of the three Chögyel (*chos rgyal*) or ‘Religious Kings.’”<sup>2</sup>

At this time, the Tibetans did not have a written language. Wishing to adopt Buddhism as had more advanced neighboring areas and recognizing the need for a written language to accomplish this mission, “[King] Songtsen Gampo sent the scholar Tönmi Sambhota and some students to India to develop a script and codify the language.”<sup>3</sup> Sambhota visited Kashmir, which at that time was a center of Buddhist learning and practice. “Remarkably, within decades Tibetans had an alphabet and a script adapted to their language in a complicated orthography, the basis for a literate historical culture.”<sup>4</sup> With the script created by Sambhota became the Tibetans began to adopt Buddhism from India. Subsequently, over a period of several hundred years before Buddhism was wiped out in India by the Muslim Mughals from Persia, the Tibetan kings and wealthy Tibetans undertook to translate the Buddhist literature of India, both the word of the Buddha and the commentarial tradition, that the Indians had amassed in more than a millennium since the time of the Buddha. Many Tibetan scholars and translators “met with Indian scholars and adepts and through hearing, thinking and meditating maintained and furthered the Conqueror’s [Buddha’s] teaching.”<sup>5</sup> This was certainly one of the greatest cross-pollinations of culture in human history.

By the time of the destruction of Buddhism in India, the Tibetans had amassed translations of the great majority of Indian Buddhist literature as well as a substantial portion of the Hindu literature. Once access to India was cut off, the Tibetans retreated to their mountainous home, the Land of Snows (*bod gang jen pa*). But there the Tibetans did not simply preserve the words of the Indian Buddhists in stasis but actively pursued a course of intense study, reorganizing the material, and adding greatly to the commentarial tradition.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*, Third edition, The Religious Life of Man Series, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1982), p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *The Buddhism of Tibet*, translated and edited by Jeffrey Hopkins (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1987), p. 21

### **THE BONDING OF RELIGION, EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN OLD TIBET**

Thus, from the beginning of Buddhism in Tibet and for well over a millennium since, the Tibetan government has been keenly involved in both religion and education. Many Westerners tend to think of Tibet as an enchanted land, the real Shangri-La, and though it is certain that Tibet is a unique place and the Tibetans are a unique people, one cannot say that they live in a heavenly land free of fault. As in every occasion when religion, education, and the government have come together, in Tibet too, there were sometimes disputes, political intrigue, and even assassinations that arose due to the wish for power and control. Even many of the fourteen Dalai Lamas did not live to see their eighteenth birthdays, probably assassinated by the ruling monastic theocrats. After all, this is what one should expect--political intrigue and assassinations, for this is what has happened throughout history all over the globe. The Tibetans have been the same as the rest of humanity.

What is more surprising is that to a great extent Tibet remained as a peaceful country for more than a thousand years after the arrival of Buddhism. And it was a country where education was available to most anyone and a country with religious freedom. Though the Tibetans did not welcome outside influences, there was a Muslim community free to practice in Tibet. For hundreds of years the Tibetans were spiritual advisers for the Chinese emperors. And when the grandson of Genghis Khan arrived to conquer Tibet in the thirteenth century, the Tibetans converted the Mongolians to their variety of Buddhism. They just wanted to be left alone to practice their religion in peace.

In this time, Tibet was a feudal society under the rule of a cabal of great monastic universities, headed up by a series of Dalai Lamas beginning in the sixteenth century. A few wealthy families of old Tibet were able to afford private education, but most education took place in the monastic universities. The largest of these monastic universities was Dre-bung, having at its greatest as many as 14,000 monks. By the time of the fall of Tibet in 1959, approximately one-third of the males were monks and one-quarter of the females were nuns. Practically all of these men and women, girls and boys, in the monasteries and nunneries were educated, at least in reading and writing. And practically all the rest of the Tibetan people of the time remained illiterate.

Why did the monasteries of Tibet take education to be a central function of their

activities? In the same way that the University of Oxford and all the great, old universities of Britain and Europe develop out of a tradition of religious education, the monasteries of Tibet and the monasteries of India before them were the centers of learning. In the case of Buddhism, learning has always been a central focus. This is because Buddhism is what is known as a wisdom tradition. That is, it is founded in the realizations, the wisdom, of the Buddha and it asserts that each of us is capable of coming to the same realizations as the Buddha and therefore each of us is able to become a Buddha as well. Thus, the Buddhist path the Tibetans pursue is to try to make the same realizations as the Buddha, and this is generally dependent on learning.

According to the Buddhist way of thinking, due to the force of ignorance, beings suffer continuously in a round of rebirth. Like prisoners moving from cell to cell, so long as suffering beings lack realization, there is no possibility for escaping the repeated round of birth, aging, sickness, and death. Thus the Buddhist believe that each individual must generate the liberating wisdom that frees one from the prison of repeated rebirth. Buddha said:

Buddhas neither wash sins away with water,  
Nor remove beings' sufferings with their hands,  
Nor transfer their realizations to others; beings  
Are freed through the teachings of the truth, the nature of things.<sup>6</sup>

Buddhas cannot grant liberation to suffering beings. Rather, they teach them the nature of things and thereby enable them to escape from suffering in a round of rebirth by their own attainment of wisdom. According to this view, ignorance is the root cause of all suffering and wisdom is the antidote to ignorance. Through learning one eventually becomes established in wisdom. "Putting far away ... a foolish doctrine which pleases laziness, one ought to do at first, as well as one can, an extensive learning of the doctrine."<sup>7</sup> Ashvaghosha's *Garland of*

---

<sup>6</sup> Tenzin Gyatso (*bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho*), The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, *The Buddhism of Tibet and The Key to the Middle Way*, The Wisdom of Tibet Series 1, trans. by Jeffrey Hopkins and Lati Rimpoche (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> Geshe Lhundup Sopa, *Lectures on Tibetan Religious Culture* (University of Wisconsin, unpublished manuscript, 1972), Part 1, p. 180.

*the Life Tales (jataka-mala)* says:

Learning is like a lamp for eliminating the darkness of ignorance.<sup>8</sup>

Just as a lamp provides light to a house so that one can see colors and shapes, so learning and wisdom enable one to see the nature of phenomena. According to one Tibetan lama, Lati Rinbochay, “There is no phenomenon which cannot be understood. There is no doctrine which, if studied well, cannot be learned, and there is no person who, if he or she studies well, cannot become wise.”<sup>9</sup>

In the Tibetan monastic universities the focus of studies is on learning the Buddha’s doctrine of the four noble truths and, through meditation, internalizing the meaning of those truths.<sup>10</sup> The first of these noble truths is true sufferings, that all unenlightened beings imprisoned in the round of rebirth are constantly beset by suffering. The second truth is true origins, which is ignorance and all the negative attitudes and activities ignorance induces--anger, jealousy, lying, killing, and so on. The Buddhist idea is that ultimately the root cause of all suffering is ignorance, especially ignorance about one’s own nature. The third truth of the Buddha is true cessations, the assertion that there is a possibility of utter eradication of suffering--the state of nirvana. The fourth is true paths, the path leading to the state of freedom from suffering and the causes of suffering. This “path” is the wisdom consciousness knowing the actual nature of phenomena, oneself and other things. Wisdom is the actual antidote to ignorance and the cure for suffering. Once ignorance is removed, one is freed from the round of rebirth.

Thus, in the monastic universities of Tibet learning is not mere academics but a way of using direct implications from the obvious in order to generate an inference of the non-obvious state of phenomena. The monastery is the center of the Buddha’s doctrine and a gathering place for those seeking inward peace and spiritual growth. In the Tibetan monasteries the sole purpose for study is to put the Buddha’s teachings into practice in order

---

<sup>8</sup> Ashvaghosha, *Jatakamala*, reported in Sopa, p. 166.

<sup>9</sup> Lati Rinbochay, oral commentary

<sup>10</sup> Geshé Rabten, *The Life and Teaching of Geshé Rabten, A Tibetan Lama’s Search for Truth*, trans. and ed. by B. Alan Wallace (Gelong Jhampa Kelsang), (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p. 14.

to attain enlightenment.<sup>11</sup>

After about 1600 CE the predominant order of Tibetan Buddhism is the Ge-luk-ba order, the order of the Dalai Lama. In the Ge-luk-ba order, the program of studies begins with basic reading and writing and, over a period of about twenty years, closely surveys the Buddhist literature of India along with Tibetan commentaries. Each year scores of monks in the three main Ge-luk-ba monasteries sit for their final examinations, but the best of the best were traditionally examined together during the Great Prayer Festival (*smon lam chen mo*) held annually in Hla-sa (Lhasa) at the beginning of the Tibetan New Year. This custom has been re-established by the Tibetan community living in exile in India. Each year sixteen examinees are given the title of “Hla-ram-ba Ge-shay.” The title “Ge-shay” means “spiritual friend” or virtuous friend,” and “Hla-ram-ba” indicates that among Ge-shays, these are those with the “rank of Hla-sa,” the capital city. The sixteen best of the successful examinees are ranked in order. “Depending upon the quality of the examination, a numerical order of merit in the disputation—first, second, and so on is assigned by the Tibetan government.”<sup>12</sup>

### CONCLUSION

So in the case of old Tibet there was a real bonding of religion, education, and the role of government. The power and money of Tibet were put into the monasteries and the monasteries were the main providers of education. In all fairness, it is important to point out that the predominant activity of every Tibetan monastery and nunnery is prayer and meditation, not academic training. Although all monasteries offer basic reading and writing, not all offer sophisticated study.

And for the nuns, very often in old Tibet they merely memorized their prayers and were not taught even reading and writing. Fortunately this has greatly changed since the Tibetan diaspora of 1959. Within a couple years the first Tibetan nuns will sit for their final examinations and gain the same Ge-shay degrees as their male counterparts.

The religion of “Old Tibet” is to a great extent the religion of new Tibet as well. Though the Tibetans did reorganize and comment, there has been a strong continuity of belief and practice in Tibet dating back to the time of King Songtsen Gampo up to the present day.

---

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Rabten, pp. 13ff.

<sup>12</sup> Sopa, p. 43.

Since the invasion of Tibetan by Chinese occupiers in the late 1940s, freedom of religious practice in Tibet has been greatly reduced and at times absent. Yet the practice of the Tibetan style of Buddhism flourishes in the Tibetan community in exile and, during the period of the Tibetan diaspora, Tibetan Buddhism has spread to many lands.

When Prince Siddhartha, the Buddha-to-be sat down under the bodhi tree 2500 years ago, the demon Mara, who seduces by illusion, tried to prevent the Siddhartha from completing his path. First, he tried to distract Siddhartha by offering his beautiful daughters dancing seductively, and when this failed, he threatened him with his fierce armies. Siddhartha was not distracted by seduction nor threatened by force. His resolve and his mind remained stable. The Buddha understood that but for his own mind, Mara could not keep him bound with things he might desire or threaten him with things he might fear.

The Buddha's resolve suggests the importance of the traditional distinction between self-powered religions and other-powered religions. Self-powered religions such as Buddhism suggest that the ultimate source of liberation arises from within. That is, one is freed by wisdom, and this is an internal understanding. So at the end of his life the Buddha advised his followers, "Be a lamp unto yourself." Illuminate your own path, find your own freedom. Other-powered religions such as Christianity suggest that the ultimate source of salvation lies outside of oneself. So in the Gospel of John, Chapter 6 Verse 14, Jesus is quoted as saying, "No one comes to the Father but by me." That is, one is freed by God only through the figure of Jesus.

In self-powered religions such as Buddhism, since what ultimately frees one is an internal achievement of wisdom, what imprisons one is also internal, and that is ignorance. This includes one's ascent to the power of illusion. The Buddhists do not see Mara as an external person in the way that Christians see the figure of Satan. Rather, Mara is simply illusion and the power of the illusion depends on our belief in it. This is precisely the point of connection between faith and knowledge. Faith in something may or may not imply knowledge in regard to that thing.

"Faith" means "putting one's trust in." Thus, when one says for instance that one has faith in Jesus, this indicates that one has put one's trust in the figure of Jesus. The objects of one's faith may be religious or non-religious. However, religion itself is always faith-based.

It may be possible for one to clarify religious beliefs to the point of knowledge, but at least initially religious beliefs are based in faith.

In common parlance, faith is opposed to knowledge, but clearly faith and knowledge may overlap. For instance, if one knows something such as that adding two oranges to two oranges will yield four oranges, then certainly one has every faith that the sum will be four oranges. Thus, faith or the use of the word 'faith' does not always imply a lack of knowledge. However, on the other hand faith does not always imply knowledge, as when one realizes that a trusted friend has lied. Then unhappily one must admit that one did not know that the friend was honest, one simply had faith.

So faith in something may or may not imply knowledge in regard to that thing. However, when there is knowledge, knowledge functions to oppose illusion and misperception. And education, when done with integrity, seeks to support and convey reliable knowledge. To use an example out of ancient Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, suppose one sees the snow on distant peaks as blue. In modern times, we understand this perception is due to the interplay of light and water molecules. But in any age a knowledgeable observer would understand that, when one draws closer to the mountain, the snow will appear as white. So knowledge opposes the perception of the snow as blue.

That faith does not always entail knowledge allows for misfortune and exploitation, in religion and countless other matters. Although we all readily think of religion as involving faith, in fact faith is a factor in education and government as well.

When one has faith in regard to a religion, one trusts that that religion will be able to help one through life and hopefully in any life that comes after this one. Students have faith in education and in their educators, in so far as they expect the institution and the individuals to act with integrity and competence. And citizens have faith in their government to serve and protect. In all of these cases the measure of faith and trust waxes and wanes. It is clear that in the case of old Tibet the Tibetan people were extremely faithful, and to a great extent the bonding of religion, education, and government functioned effectively. And in the case of the Tibetan government and culture now surviving in exile the Tibetan people continue to have great faith in their government and cultural institutions, as they wait for the day when they

may finally return to their homeland.

There is one important final point in regard to the bonding of religion, education, and government in the Tibetan tradition, a point that relates to current concerns in the world. In addition to the emphasis on learning for the sake of developing the liberating wisdom, in Tibetan Buddhism there is a pervasive emphasis on love and compassion. The Dalai Lama has said, “My religion is kindness.” This is rooted in the Buddha’s teaching of non-harmfulness, that one should at all times seek to avoid harming any living being, oneself or others. In addition, in Great Vehicle Buddhism, the core of the Tibetan tradition, the practitioner develops the wish to achieve the welfare of all beings, whether friends, neutral persons, or enemies. If you want to know about Tibetan Buddhism and the daily practice of the Dalai Lama, this is what you should know--love and compassion. Here love is identified as the wish that beings have happiness and the causes of happiness, and compassion is the wish that beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering. And the fulfillment, the intent, of these wishes is that beings would be freed from the prison of a round of rebirth.

Because of these doctrines of non-harmfulness, love, and compassion, during more than a dozen years of Chinese communist occupation prior to 1959, the monasteries did not become breeding grounds for resistance and terrorism. Early on, there were monks who took up arms in the struggle against the Chinese invaders. And, as in the case of Afghanistan, through the CIA the United States assisted the Tibetan resistance until about 1962. Since that time, after the Dalai Lama sent word to the resistance to lay down their arms, all violent resistance has stopped. Faced with the choice of disobeying the Dalai Lama’s instructions or to give up the armed struggle, some freedom fighters committed suicide. Although a military cause against the mighty Chinese could never have succeeded, the Tibetans might have struggled on with violence. But they did not. And for this, they deserve the support of every person of conscience. Their cause is just, and they have suffered tremendously. Indeed, nearly one in five Tibetans, more than a million people, have been put to death in the genocidal campaign of the Communist Chinese occupation. Even so, in obedience to the Buddha’s doctrine of non-harmfulness, there are no Tibetan terrorist groups who struggle against Chinese occupation and oppression. It seems clear that, if governments are to oppose terrorism and pursue a global war on terrorism, then it would be appropriate to give support to those people who have a just cause but have not resorted to terrorism, to affirm that they can succeed

by peaceful means.

\*\*\*\*\*

This paper is a revised version of the paper delivered at the Oxford Round Table conference on “Religion, Education and the Role of Government” at Oriel College in the University of Oxford on Tuesday, August 9, 2005.

## REFERENCES

- John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1995),
- Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*, Third edition, The Religious Life of Man Series, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1982)
- His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *The Buddhism of Tibet*, translated and edited by Jeffrey Hopkins (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1987),
- Tenzin Gyatso (*bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho*), The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, *The Buddhism of Tibet and The Key to the Middle Way*, The Wisdom of Tibet Series 1, trans. by Jeffrey Hopkins and Lati Rinpoche (New York: Harper & Row, 1975)
- Geshe Lhundup Sopa, *Lectures on Tibetan Religious Culture* (University of Wisconsin, unpublished manuscript, 1972),
- Geshé Rabten, *The Life and Teaching of Geshé Rabten, A Tibetan Lama's Search for Truth*, trans. and ed. by B. Alan Wallace (Gelong Jhampa Kelsang), (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980),