

THE MISSING CONTEXT OF CHOS

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Recently Mr. Robert B. Ekvall, a scholar with many years' experience of China and eastern border-lands of Tibet, has made a remarkably original study of "Tibetan religious observances" and "their functional role" (*Religious Observances in Tibet: Patterns and Function*, University of Chicago Press, 1964). Ekvall's novel study has provoked varied reactions among scholars of Mahayana as well as scholars of cultural anthropology. As a student of history—history of ideas and institutions of India and Central Asia, this writer is constrained to point out a basic lacuna in this work.

Either because of his acquaintance with China and Chinese Buddhism or perhaps because of his lack of acquaintance with the home-land of Buddhism, Ekvall often ignores the Indian background and seeks to find in China the meaning of Tibetan religious observances. His "examination and explanation of what the word Chos ("religion") comprehends in the context of Tibetan conceptualization and thought" is an example of this imbalance. He finds that Chos may cover anything from "a scrap of paper" to "knowledge, systems of thought, linguistic usage, and even forms of social organization". "Used in this way" reports Ekvall "it comprehends more of the whole of Tibetan thought and culture and occupies a position of even greater importance than the word *Tao* occupies in the context of Chinese thought and culture" (p.67). Since Taoism or Confucianism does not provide key to this omnibus word, Ekvall quotes from a document of 28 October 1958 (Royal Charter of Incorporation of Namgyal Institute of Tibetology) to expound the wide connotation of Chos. What this scholar fails to notice is that the Lotsavas' acceptance of the Tibetan Chos as the correct equivalent of the Sanskrit Dharma brought in its train all the diverse meanings of the Indian prototype. For a satisfactory definition of Chos, Ekvall had to hold "long and intensive discussion" with several eminent Tibetan scholars resident in USA (p.104 f.n.) and even resorted to a Chinese dictionary (p.105 f.n.); curiously enough he did not care to consult the traditional lexicons of Tibet. A

look into the modern dictionary of Geshe Choda (དགེ་བཤེས་ རྗེ་གཙམ་པ་), which Ekvall uses on other points, would have given him an adequate definition of the word as understood in the original medium (Sanskrit), at least the ten meanings ascribed to Vasubandhu—ལ་རྗེ་ཤེས་གུ་ཡམ་དང་རྗེ་ ལུ་ངེ་འདས་དང་ཡིང་གི་ལུ་ལ། བསོད་ནམས་རྫོང་དང་གསུང་རབ་དང་། འབྲུང་འབྲུང་ཤེས་དང་ཤེས་ལུ་གས་ལའོ།། (Lhasa xylograph, Vol I; also Peking edition, p.272).

During his long sojourn in Eastern Tibet Ekvall should have noticed that next to the Six Mystic Syllables: Om Mani Padme Hum, the most widely spread inscription on stupas, temples and monasteries or on prayer wheels, images and instruments of rituals is that about *all those things springing from cause and liberation thereof*. རྗེ་ས་རྣམས་ཐམས་ཅད་ཀྱི་ ལམ་ལུང་། དེ་གྱི་དེ་བཞིན་གཤེགས་ལས་གསུང་མ། ཀྱི་ལ་འགོ་ག་ལ་གང་ཡིན་པ། དགེ་རྫོང་རྗེ་རྟོ་བོ་ས་འདི་སྒང་ གསུང་།, that is, *ये धर्माः हेतु प्रभवाः हेतुं तेषां तथागतो ह्यवदत् । तेषां च यो निरोधो एवं वादी महाश्रमणः ॥* Not unoften one finds the Sanskrit original in Uchen, sometimes in the archaic Lantsa. The present writer experienced this in the monasteries and temples of Central Tibet and is told by Khampa scholars that this is also true of Eastern Tibet.

The fact remains that the word Dharma along with its native imagery—its diverse meanings and its multiple uses (as prefix and suffix) eventually permeated the life and thought of the Buddhists in Tibet (and later Mongolia). While the numerous meanings of Dharma in Sanskrit literature are cited in standard Sanskrit-English dictionaries (e.g. Monier-Williams and Apte), the special usages in Buddhist thought are collected in *Pali-English Dictionary* (PTS) and *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary* (Edgerton). It is intended to notice here the migration of the category Dharma (with all its content) to Tibet (and later Mongolia). No attempt can be made here to present all the meanings of the Indian term; specialists have found the scores of entries in the above four dictionaries as only representative and by no means exhaustive. It will suffice to say that Dharma in the sense of the Buddha's teachings, law, truth, nature of mind, existent things and conditions, element or constituent of existence, qualities acquired by an adept, or discourses was fully absorbed and incorporated into Tibetan Buddhist thought and expression.

A knowledge of the secular aspects and implications of Dharma is considered necessary for an understanding of the political history of ancient India, and this may perhaps hold

good for some Northern Buddhist countries if we substitute Chos for Dharma. A scholar of ancient Indian polity notices as many as eight different meanings of Dharma: (i) custom, (ii) law of the social order, (iii) norm of social classes, (iv) righteousness in relation to the temporal ruler, (v) virtue as one of the four ends of human existence, (vi) ethics, (vii) righteous edict of king and (viii) solemn affirmation by a party to a suit (Ghoshal: *A History of Indian Political Ideas*, Oxford University Press, 1959). No less than three words from Western terminology, namely, *jus*, *lex* and *recht*, are thus required to express Dharma in secular sense. As a measure of the dimensions of the subject it may be mentioned that an authoritative exposition (in English) of Dharma in the sense of law and administration of justice covers seven tomes running into 6500 pages, that is, Kane: *History of Dharmasastra* (Poona, 1930-62).

The word Dharma is derived from root *dhri* (धृ) which means to nourish, to uphold or to support. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, in a section about the creation of the world, says that the Creator was not strong enough even after He created the forms of Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras and thus created "the excellent form *dhirma*: the *kshatra* of the *kshatra*; therefore there is nothing higher than the *dharma*; thenceforth even a weakman rules the stronger by means of the *dharma* as one does through a king. Verily *dharma* is *satya* (truth): and when a man speaks *satya* they say he speaks *dharma* or when he speaks *dharma* they say he speaks *satya*; thus both are same".

स नैव व्यभवत् तत् श्रेयः रूपम् अत्यसृजत धर्मं तदेतत् क्षत्रस्य क्षलं
 एद् धर्मस् तस्माद् धर्मात् परं नास्ति अथो अबलीयान् दलीयांसम् आर्शंसते धर्मेण यथा
 राज्ञं वं यो वै स धर्मः सत्यं वै तत् तस्मात् सत्यं वदन्तम् आहूर् धर्मं वदति इति धर्मं
 वा वदन्तं सत्यं वदति इति एतद् हि एव एतद् उभयं भवति ॥ The sense of
 paramountcy of ORDER (moral and physical) in the scheme of
 universe is traced back to the most ancient Indo-Iranian *rita*
 (ऋत). A connected narrative of this concept however dates
 from the time of the Upanishads. The point to note, as in the
 above passage, is that Dharma and Satya are identical categories
 and that the political authority (king) is the instrument of Dharma.
 As a consequence the duty of the king constituted the duty par excellence,
 'the royal *religion*' (Rajadharma) and the king discharging such duty
 became 'the *religious* king (Dharmaraja).

In ancient India Dharmaraja seems to have been a royal title of higher order than Maharaja or Maharajadhiraja. There is some epigraphic evidence of the composite title Dharmamaharaja. Chos-rgyal and Chos-rgyal Chenpo are most perfect renderings of Dharmaraja and Dharmamaharaja doing justice both to Sanskrit etymology and Tibetan syntax.

In Tibetan tradition the kings from Srong-btsan-sgampo to Ral-pa-chen are known as Chos-rgyal. The tradition perhaps cropped up after the final victory of Buddhism, and as Mr. Hugh Richardson points out the sole epigraphic evidence of an early king calling himself Chos-rgyal is that of Khri-srong-lde-btsan². The Tibetan tradition about the epithet Chos-rgyal is not unlike the Indian tradition about Asoka. Asoka called himself Devanampriya (Beloved of the Gods) while later tradition knew him to be a Dharmaraja. In Tibet whoever might have been the first to call himself Chos-rgyal, that is, Dharmaraja, he no doubt extended sanction to two new facts (i) the new Chos called Dharma as the established religion and (ii) the king (rgyalpo) as the instrument of this Chos.

The office of Chos-rgyal acquired a historic significance in Northern Buddhist countries. When the Gelugpa hierarch (Dalai Lama) became the ruler of Tibet he was appropriately addressed as Chos-rgyal as earlier the Sakya hierarch was called Chos-rgyal. A millennium after Srong-btsan-sgampo princes from Mynak (in eastern Tibet) carved out a kingdom in the land of the Lepchas and established Chos as the state religion. Appropriately the first great king of Sikkim, Phuntsog rNam-rgyal, was consecrated by three Lamas as Chos-rgyal (1642).

The point for emphasis is that none but a true follower of Chos could be a Chos-rgyal. Thus while several Mongol Khans were unreservedly called Chos-rgyal³, the Manchu Emperors, though conceded to be some sort of incarnations of hJam-dpal (Manjusri), do not feature in Tibetan records as Chos-rgyal.

The first and greatest Chos-rgyal (Dharmaraja) of Tibetan tradition is Asoka (Mya-ngan-med). Besides as in Indian tradition the epithet Chos-rgyal came to be applied to Sangs-rgyas (Buddha) and gShin-rje (Yama). All these point to the Indian context of the connotation of Chos.

Ekvall is not the only scholar to ignore the Indian context of Tibetan Buddhism or to seek enlightenment from the Chinese context. Buddhism as a distinct religion came to an end in the plains of India and this provides justification to several scholars to underestimate the Indian context. These scholars are obviously ignorant of the fact that the Mahayana which spread over Tibet and Mongolia was nursed and nourished in the Himalayas in a typically Indian climate. [Besides such methodology would warrant study of European Christianity in total ignorance of the Hebrew context.] Secondly, in such methodology Tibet having been from time to time a part of the Chinese Empire the context for Chos has to be traced in China. It is not necessary to comment here on the proposition of Tibet being a part of China for any effective length of time. It is however necessary to say that according to many competent scholars Chinese Buddhism was more Chinese than Buddhist.⁴ Tibetans no doubt felt that way and accepted the exposition of Chos by Kamalasila the Indian in preference to that by Hoshang the Chinese, towards the end of the eighth century after Christ. For Tibet that fixed the context of her Dharma.⁵

The context is writ large in Kanju and Tanjur where a title is first announced "in the language of India" (rgyagar-skad-du). It is confusing to reverse the precedence and say, as Ekvall does (p.232), "Byang-chub sems-dpa, commonly termed Bodhisattva". Certainly the altruistic doctrine of Bodhisattva found better expression in Tibet than in India owing to the more favourable socio-economic climate in Tibet. Yet any account of this altruism has to begin with the Indian Mahayana tradition. Ekvall builds his exposition around the practice of exposure of the corpse for feeding the vultures and finds it "strongly reminiscent of the practices that have persisted in China from earliest times" (p.73). This conjecture about disposal of the dead may be correct but a Tibetan would trace his entire code of altruistic practices and rituals to Bhadrachari (bZang-spyod) or Bodhicharyavatara (Spyod-hjug) or to the root, namely, Prajnaparamita (Shes-rab-kyi pha-rol-tu-phyin-pa). In this novel study of Tibetan Buddhism which has missed the context of Chos, the Indian concepts of Triratna (dKon-mchog-gsum), Trikaya (sKu-gsum) or Tridhatu (Khams-gsum) attain the Sunyata (sTong-pa-nyid) in a special sense.

NOTES

1. In the first stage of the encounter between Bon and Buddhism the term Chos was good for both religions though Lhai Chos, Nangpai Chos or Sangs-rgyas kyi Chos was more unequivocal for Buddhism. cf. Tucci: *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* (Rome 1949), Vol II and *The Tombs of the Tibetan Kings* (Rome 1950). After the final triumph of Buddhism Chos was as good as Sangs-rgyas kyi Chos. Bon on the otherhand came to be expressed as Bon Chos or simply Bon. See also note 5.
2. "A New Inscription of Khri Srong Lde Brtsan" in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (London), April 1964.
3. hPhags-pa calls Kubilai Chos-rgyal Mi-dbang (འཕགས་པ་མི་དབང་ལྷོ་བཟང་འགྲུག་པ་བཞིན་དུ། Counsel for the King: ལྷོ་པ་ལོ་གདམས་པའི་རབ་དཀྱིལ།)
[This reference has been promptly traced for me by my pupil Jamyang Kunga Mynak Tulku.] See also note 5.
4. e.g. Arthur Wright (USA) and E. Zurcher (Holland). It is relevant to note that the Indian Sinologist Prabodh Bagchi (d. 1956) was lukewarm about the theory of Buddhist conquest of China, propounded by European Buddhists and acclaimed by Indian scholars who lacked acquaintance with Buddhism in China. China's relationship with Buddhism was a pre-eminently political matter as borne out from history of Tibet and Mongolia. The present writer is engaged in a study of this relationship.
5. Even though "strongly resistant to or inhospitable to loan words" (Ekvall, p.13), Tibet accommodated the Sanskrit word Dharma (ཞུགས་) and eventually transmitted it to Mongolia. A grandson of Kubilai was named Dharmapala. v. Hulan-deb-ther (*The Red Annals*, Sikkim 1961, folio 14b).