

TEN PRICELESS IMAGES

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I

On 1 October 1958 when the Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology was opened we had only one piece of bronze and a few painted scrolls. And in fact our principal programme was for collection and procurement of Tibetan literary sources in manuscripts and xylographs. Yet within three years our collection of icons and scrolls had numbered nearly a hundred. All these were old (some very old) and authentic, that is, these were from temples, monasteries and ancient households. Far more interesting was the fact that about fifty items were free and unsolicited gifts. A few donors were frankly poor refugees from Central and Eastern Tibet and refused any payment; they firmly asserted that they were not sellers of images and that they donated these for safe custody in a place which was to them a sacred repository of scriptures and icons; the donors, rich and poor alike, would not call this Institute a library or museum as we do.

I seek to present here TEN PRICELESS accessions during the first three years. Before I enumerate or describe these gifts I should state that in Mahayana/Northern Buddhist tradition an icon

or scroll is not donated in the ordinary sense of the term. A donor proposes to transfer the custody of his dear treasure to a friend, disciple or relative and from the date of transfer the donor and the donee share the sacred object jointly.

The Institute was opened in October 1958 and in January 1959 a mystic saint, a Lama from Kham, had predicted to me in the course of a dialogue that this Institute would in near future be a place of traditional veneration, a site of pilgrimage for the believers. I need not go into details of this prophecy but must confess that though not much of a believer in the right sense of the term I have been witness to fulfilment of this prophecy in many ways, particularly about the accession of icons. In 1961 summer a Tibetan refugee brought to us a rare and exquisite bronze, the image of Prajna-Paramita, consort of Manjusri. He wanted me to quote a fair price. I consulted our Lamas for their opinion and our funds and appropriation figures. I told the Tibetan that we could offer only up to Rs. 1200/- while this image (3") would sell easily for Rs. 2500/- in Calcutta and we were not interested to cheat him. The Tibetan refugee said "I know that your scholar friends, Indian or American, may pay even Rs. 5000/-. But I want a proper custody for my household icon which is more than 300 years old. Take

this image for Rs. 1100/- which I require for journey to Dorjedan (Bodhgaya) and my Puja there". We most readily "bought" the image. Experts would price this today for Rs. 10,000/-.

I refer to these events to focus attention of readers today to the network of Western Foundations all over Tibetan refugee colonies like Misamari and Mussoorie in 1959-62. These Foundations would offer fantastic, I should say fabulous, prices for Tibetan icons and art objects and this Institute could not join the race. Our laws banning export of antiquities and art treasures were not framed to meet the contingency. An example of American pricing was provided by a set of 18 woven scrolls (tapestry style) depicting the Panchen Lineage from Adi Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Sakyamuni and Subhuti to the Sixth Panchen (d 1937). The three sets were made in 1933 to mark the Birth Anniversary of the then Panchen. One was kept by the Panchen for the Tashi Lunpo Nangten and two were returned with blessings to the donor devotee. These two sets were brought in 1960-62 to Misamari-Buxa camps. An American Foundation paid more than Rs. 8000/- for a set and we had the other for less than Rs. 2000/- as requested by the party concerned.

A few words are necessary before the Ten Images are described. The term "bronze" is a

conventional expression for all images in metal: gold, silver, copper, brass or alloy. According to tradition, original Indian or later Tibetan, an ideal image should contain Asta Dhatu, that is, eight metals. The eight metals are gold, silver, copper, nickel, iron, lead, zinc and tin; one particular metal, say gold or copper, may be the principal material but a little quantity of each of the other seven should be accommodated. Thus "bronze" would not necessarily mean an alloy of copper and brass or copper and tin. Another point to note about iconography in Tibet is that nearly all images would be in metal, some would be in sandalwood from India or some sacred wood from Tibet, and a few would be in sacred clay from select sites. In Tibet or Mongolia images in stone would not be generally made as any attempt to compete with the masters of Sarnath, Gandhara or Amaravati would be blasphemy or arrogance.

Tibetan equivalents of Sanskrit words are here transcribed phonetically, as for example Lama (for Bla-ma) or Chenrezik (for Spyan-ras-gzigs). The ten accessions are listed here in a chronological sequence and no comparative evaluation is intended. Dating of the images in this article is in Christian era.

II

GURU PADMASAMBHAVA

Our very first accession in icons was a bronze of Guru Padmasambhava. Vide Plate One. This was the gift from the Maharaja who had chosen the image from Palace Chapel and had issued this for the main altar of this Institute even a fortnight before the scheduled date of our opening.

The image, 42 inches high, is in copper and painted in gold. The image was made to special orders in nineteen thirties by the sculptors of Tsang and installed in the Palace Chapel around 1935. The Guru is seated on a Double Lotus (Vajrasana), holds in his right hand Vajra (Dorje) and in his left hand Kapali (Skull), containing Pot of Ambrosia with Amitayus Buddha on the lid. The Trident with Three Heads (Khatvanga) rests on the left shoulder. The Guru may be depicted in eight different forms. The form here is Upaya Prajna (Thab-dang-Sherab).

Pandit Nehru was most pleased to learn that the Maharaja had offered "to share with the Institute from that day" a prized icon from the family chapel and that the custody of the image would be that of the Institute for the rest of time. Pandit Nehru had before the opening ceremony informed the Maharaja that the Relics of Asokan Sthaviras recently retrieved from London would

be presented to the Institute after the formality of the concurrence of his Cabinet colleagues was gone through. The Maharaja and authorities of the Institute thanked the Prime Minister and added that an ancient image of Gautama Buddha would be most highly prized for the altar of the top floor. Pandit Nehru readily offered to follow the Mahayana practice of sharing an image and promised to obtain concurrence of his Cabinet colleagues. In the event the Institute got transfer of a Buddha image and an Avalokitesvara image from Sarnath Museum in May 1960 Vide Plate Two.

GAUTAMA BUDDHA/AVALOKITESVARA

The image of Gautama Buddha, 26 inches high, in sandstone seems to have been carved towards the middle of ninth century. The Buddha is depicted in Dharmachakra Mudra: Turning the Wheel of Law, that is, expounding the Dharma.

The image of Avalokitesvara (Chenrezi) 25 1/2 inches high, in sandstone, seems to have been carved towards the middle of ninth century. Though one of 108 forms, Avalokitesvara standing in Padma-pani Mudra was not very commonly sculptured. For 108 forms Bhattacharya: *The Indian Buddhist Iconography* (Calcutta 1958) may be seen.

The two images representing Sarnath school and carved in stone have proved of great attraction to Tibetan visitors.

SAMBARA

The image of Chakrasambara, Sambara or Mahasukha (DeChog) is a gift from Yarpa Tempo Namgyal Barphungpa who had it for safe custody from Kundeling monks and kindly offered to share this with this Institute. Vide Plate Three. The image, 40 inches high, is in copper and painted with gold. The execution of the details is exquisite; some of the instruments and symbols were damaged/lost during the hazardous journey from Lhasa to Gangtok through different agencies. A description of this Yab-Yum with the symbolic meaning is appended at the end of this article.

VIJAYA

The image of Ushnisha Vijaya, Sarvajaya or Vijaya (Namgyalma) is a gift from Yarpa Tempo Namgyal Barphungpa, collected from a Kundeling temple. The image, 30 inches high, is in brass and painted with gold. The deity has Three Heads and Eight Arms. Though this icon does not depict the symbolic objects for all arms, except the Double Thunderbolt in the two normal ones this also is an exquisite work. Vide Plate Four.

The two gifts, Sambara and Vijaya, which came to us in early 1960, are known to have been sculptured at the end of the nineteenth century.

MANJUSRI

The image of Manjusri, on the altar of the ground floor, was gift from Maharajkumari Pema Chokyi on behalf of her father-in-law Kalon Yothok, Governor of Chamdo. The image, seven feet and seven inches high including the Lion Throne pedestal, is in copper and painted in silver. It is the most popular representation of the Buddha of Knowledge, with Sword of Knowledge in the right hand and Book of Transcendental Knowledge above the left shoulder on a lotus. The pedestal adds to its attraction. The workmanship is of high order. Vide Plate Five.

I should add that the image was ordered in Chamdo for the old Yuthok House (Lhasa) which was often visited by the Tenth Dalai Lama, Tshulthim Gyatso (1816-1837).

AVALOKITESVARA

The copper image of Avalokitesvara, 10 inches high, is a gift from Padmashri Lachchman Singh

Jangpangi. The donor had worked first as Assistant Trade Agent and later as Trade Agent at Gartok for more than 25 years and afterwards for about 5 years as Trade Agent at Yatung. He got this icon in Buddha Jayanti Year (1956) from Lamas connected with Tholing monastery. The image was brought to Western Tibet from India before 1800. It is a beautiful bronze as the details of the Four Handed figure on Lotus Seat would bear out. Vide Plate Six.

TARA

Plate Seven depicts three icons of Tara (Dolma), two in brass and one in sacred clay. The brass pieces are 3 inches and 4 inches high and the clay one 2 inches. The clay piece was presented by a Lama; one bronze was gift from Maharaj-kumari Pheunkhang Lhacham, and the other was from a pauper Tibetan. Tara image, from monastic or household altar, is not available for sale. The pauper had sold us a few other images on the price we could offer but made a gift of the Tara image.

III

YAB-YUM

For the general reader interested in the symbo-

lism of Yab-Yum I cannot do better than quote Marco Pallis about Sambhara/Mahasukha from the famous book *Peaks and Lamas*

"The Chief Divinity, "Circle of Higher Bliss", has four faces symbolizing fourfold sets of ideas, among them the Elements of earth, water, fire and air which with ether constitute the material Universe and the Four Boundless Wishes which are Compassion, Affection, Love, and Impartiality; but there are several other sets of a still more profound character. The body is blue, to symbolize that He never changes from "the Wisdom which knows that the things which are coloured differently and the like are really not so but they are all of a single nature and taste." Each face has three eyes to show that the Three Worlds—the Sensual, the World of Form but without sensual craving and the Formless Spiritual World—are under His vision and also that He knows the Three Times—past, Present and future. He has twelve arms that represent His knowledge of the Twelve Interdependent Origins of the Round of Existence.

To prove that Perfected Mind (the mind of a Buddhist, the ideal to which all should aspire) is both the Void (that is the Absolutely Real, which we can only indicate through a privative word, since for us the Real cannot but be void

of determination, form, relativity and all that we can possibly conceive of) and Compassion (the pure sacrificial Love which characterizes the Bodhisat, the highest goal of Buddhism), He holds in the upper hands a dorje (thunderbolt sceptre) and a bell. To show that Method and Knowledge are ever in union the first pair of hands clasp His Spouse or Shakti. The next two hands hold a raw elephant hide which they are tearing asunder: this is the emblem of Ignorance. The third right hand holds a drum, proclaiming the most joyous tidings. The fourth hand brandishes a battle-axe by which He cuts off births and deaths. The fifth holds a dagger to show that the six sins of pride, disbelief, want of serious devotion, distraction, inattention and boredom are cut off. The sixth right hand grasps a trident showing the destruction of the Root-Poisons of Anger, Desire-Attachment and Sloth (the inertia of Ignorance?).

"Now to turn to the left hands: the third holds a staff surmounted by a dorje, sign of supreme bliss, and the fourth holds a blood-filled skull, signifying that all ideas which regard things as either material or immaterial are done away with. From the fifth hand dangles a noose, the knowledge that grasps the nature of sentient beings. In the sixth left hand is the head of four-faced Brahma, showing that all the delusions of

the Round have been finally shaken off.

"Under His feet He tramples an emaciated figure of Time, proving that out of His boundless Compassion He voluntarily remains in the world of sentient beings as Saviour. His bent left leg spurns the form of a Black Destroyer, for Wisdom has got rid of every antithesis such as subject-object and enjoyer-enjoyment. His hair is tied in a knot on the crown of His head because merit has been acquired in the fullest measure. Each of His heads is adorned with a chaplet of five skulls, standing for the five kinds of Wisdom. His face frowns and His teeth are set, for by Him all heresies are overcome. His ear-rings are Fortitude, His necklace Charity, His bracelets Chastity, His girdle Energy, the Wheel of bone over His Head is Meditation.

"Round His waist is draped a tiger-skin, not tightly fastened, because He is released from all beliefs in the real distinction of Body and Mind. His limbs have symmetry and grace, His visage is heroic, stern and severe, He is full of energy, He is awe-inspiring and yet He is compassionate and His features are of a peaceful cast. (This form belongs to a type called semi-wrathful, not one of the "terrible" forms nor yet wholly "peaceful").

"We now come to His Consort — Energy who clings to Him in inextricable embrace. She is red in colour, because She is devoted to the service of all beings. She has only one face, because all things have but one taste--they are basically one. She possesses two hands, for She comprehends both aspects of Truth, the apparent and the real. Her right hand holds a curved knife which is Wisdom-Consciousness, that cuts away qualifying thoughts and passions. This weapon She thrusts in all directions. With her left hand She clasps Her partner. To show that She has untied the knot which holds all things to be what they appear Her hair is loose and flowing. She is naked for She is free from the obscuring veil of Passion. He like Her Male partner is three-eyed and crowned with the Five Wisdoms shown by skulls. He should be regarded as Appearance (that is the Phenomenal Universe), as Method and as Boundless Compassion; while She is the Void (the symbol of the Absolute, the Empty of all relatives), Wisdom, Tranquillity and Bliss. The pair are inseparable, so they are shown interlocked in sexual union, touching at all possible points of contact. The marriage is consummated in the midst of a halo of flames, the fire of Supreme Wisdom which burns up all obstacles."