

## BUDDHISM AND BON

-Tsewang Taming

As we all know, Buddhism is originated from India and the type of Buddhism which we are following and practising here in Sikkim right now was reshaped in Tibet and came to us through that country. When Buddhism was first established in Tibet in the 7th century by Maha Guru Padmasambhava and Khenchen Bodhisattva in the Land of the Snows, Tibet was not without a native religion of its own. At the time when king Trisong Deutsen of Tibet invited Guru Rinpoche to subjugate the evil spirits of that land, Tibet already had a highly developed indigenous religion of its own known as "Bon" and the followers of this religion were called as "Bonpos".

What is Bon? Bon is regarded as the native religion of Tibet prevalent in that country before the introduction of Buddhism and it is said to have come from the land called Shangshung which is believed to have existed somewhere in upper Tibet around Mt. Kailash extending towards the region of Ladakh. In the same way as Lord Buddha is the founder of Buddhism, Bon religion came from its Lord Tonpa Sherab Miwo who was born at a place called Wollmolungrig in Shangshung under the parenthood of Yab Mugyal Thokar and Yum Gyalshedma. The teachings and life history of Bonton Sherab Miwo are very similar to those of Lord Buddha who was born at Lumbini under the parenthood of Shakya Suddhodana and his queen Mayadevi about 566 B.C. In Western countries Bon religion is sometimes referred to as 'Shamanism' which is perhaps derived from the name of its founder 'Sherab Miwo'. From the very beginning these two religions of Tibet lived with hostility against each other. But whatever the differences there might have been between the two, both of them played a very important role in shaping the system of people's life in Tibet which has directly or indirectly affected us here in Sikkim. We can understand the influence of Buddhism upon the Bon religion by going through the Bon scripta. In the same way worshipping of spirits by erecting prayer flags and burning incense (Lhabsol) and throwing effigies of evil spirits (Lud Tongwa) could be the examples of Bon influence upon Buddhism. Because of this very uniqueness of our way of practising the religion that was developed in Tibet and came to us in Sikkim, the way of Buddhism which we are now practising in the Himalaya regions including Sikkim is popularly known as "Tibetan Buddhism" or more conveniently as 'Lamaism' in the West. But in our own dictionary we do not have such a thing called 'Tibetan Buddhism' or the 'Lamaism'. But I feel that the native religion of Bon has dominated the people's life prior to the dawn of Buddhism in Tibet and thus its influence upon the ways of Buddhist practices has something to do with this uniqueness of our religion so that it is known as Lamaism.

In Sikkim Guru Padmasambhava visited the holy places of this land and personally sanctified them in the 18th century. It is said that he has kept twenty four 'Hidden Lands' known as 'Beyul' for the benefit of future generations and Sikkim is regarded as the holiest and most important of them all. It was Guru Padmasambhava himself who gave the name 'Beyul Demojong' to this land it was he who has hidden five treasures under the snowy peaks of Khangchendzonga or the 'House of Five

Treasures'. But the real foundation of Buddhism in this land of Sikkim was laid by three great Nyingmapa Lamas Gyalwa Lhatsun Chenpo, Kathok Kuntu Sangpo and Ngadak Sempa Chenpo who entering through three different direction according to the prophesy in religious books, consecrated the first king of Sikkim, Chogyal Phuntsog Namgyal, at Yuksam Norbugang in 1642. Since then Buddhism not only took its root but also flourished well in this land right upto now. The form of Buddhism which we are practising here in Sikkim right now is the direct product of the Buddhism that was propagated by our Great Guru Padmasambhava in Tibet.

Like in Tibet, Sikkim was not without a native religion of its own at the time when Guru Rinpoche along with his twenty five disciples known as 'Jebang Nyernga' visited this land. Lepchas are the original people of Sikkim who believe that they are the sons and daughters of the virgin snow of Kanchenjunga and prior to the introduction of Buddhism in this land there used to have a highly developed Shamanistic form of native religion very much prevalent in Sikkim. Known as 'Bongthings' the Lepcha priests used to worship spirits and they are so powerful that they could treat and cure sick people and exorcise the harmful spirits. In place like Phagmorong in West Sikkim between Tashidhing and Yuksam we can still see the amazing manifestations of such Lepcha priests. Among the Lepchas the anecdotes about the miraculous performances of Thekong Mon Salang are well known. Though presently we do not have any written records to prove, it is very probable that it would not be wrong if we say that a sort of Bon religion was in practice here in Sikkim before Buddhism influenced the life of the people.

Since Bon, is the native religion of Tibet, its interaction with Buddhism was only in Tibet. Therefore, when I speak here about Buddhism and Bon, I will confine myself only to the Buddhism that was developed in Tibet and which has a direct contact with Bon religion. And here I will mostly deal with the development of Bon since the time of Tibet's first king and Buddhism since the time of Tibet's 28th king upto the death of the 42nd king Lang Darma.

Regarding the three great personalities who were responsible for the real foundation of Buddhism in Tibet i.e. Khenchen Bodhisattva, Lupon Pema Jungne and Chogyal Trisong Deutsen who are collectively known as 'Khen-Lop-Choe-Sum' in the annals of Tibetan history. Thanks to the great deeds and contributions of these personalities for the establishment and preservation of Buddhism in Tibet, today we are able to organise seminars and symposiums. Even in Sikkim the reflections of their deeds can be still seen through the volumes of Buddhist texts that are preserved in the libraries like that of the Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology.

In the following statements, now I would like to give you a comparative study of how Buddhism and Bon religion were developed in Tibet. King Trisong Deutsen of Tibet (born in 742 A.D.) invited Khenchen Bodhisattva to Tibet to preach Dharma. But Tibet by that time was a land full of evil spirits that were both harmful as well as powerful. They did not like the presence of Bodhisattva and they never allowed him to lay the foundation of Samye Monastery. Instead the evil spirits caused lots of calamities among the people. So, Khenchen Bodhisattva had no choice but to advise the

king to invite Guru Padmasambhava, the most powerful Tantrik saint at that time from India. So under the invitation of Chogyal Trisong Deutsen, Guru Rinpoche came to Tibet through Nepal subjugating all those evil spirits of Tibet on the way and making them the guardians of the Dharma. It was in 764 A.D. when Guru Rinpoche and Bodhisattva visited Tibet and in the same year they laid the foundation stone of Tibet's first monastery, Samye Migyur Drubpai Tsuglakhang, as desired by the king. With the construction of this monastery they laid the real foundation of Buddhism in that land.

After this Khenchen Bodhisattva ordained seven Tibetan boys into monkhood to experiment the Tibetan boys capability to become Buddhist monks. These seven pioneers of Tibetan monks were called 'Semi-Mi-Dun' or seven experimental monks. They were Paghor Vairocana, Chimbhu Shakya Deva, Ba Salnag, Nganlam Gyalwa Chokyang, Ma Rinchenchok, Khon Luyi Wangpo and Tsang Legdrup. The Buddhist monks we see around here these days are originated from those seven boys.

Chogyal Trisong Deutsen was very enthusiastic to translate the entire Buddhist teachings from Sanskrit language into Tibetan and so he opened a translation chamber and named it as 'Samye Dragyurling' and requested the two Indian saints to teach Sanskrit language to the Tibetan boys. The boys were not able to pick up the Sanskrit language. But under the prophesy of Guru Rinpoche the king found an extraordinary boy named Ganjak Thanglha who was later renamed by Guru Rinpoche as Vairotsana. He was personally taught by Guru Rinpoche and Khenchen Bodhisattva along with other boys. The Vairotsana was deputed to India along with Tsang Legdrup to study Sanskrit language. The two boys completed their studies successfully. But Tsang Legdrup died on the way back home. So Vairotsana returned back successfully and Chogyal Trisong Deutsen at once accepted him as his Guru. Vairotsana became the greatest Tibetan translator and he had translated countless volumes of Buddhist texts into Tibetan at the same time giving extensive sermons to the king. But at that time more than half of the ministers including his own queen in the court of Trisong Deutsen were Bonpos and the clash between the followers of the two religions were so strong that this great translator could not live comfortably. Finally he was banished to a place called Tshawairong. The reign of Chogyal Trisong Deutsen in the 8th century is a memorable one as it marked the establishment of Buddhism as much as the decline of Bon. The real foundation of Buddhism was laid during this time. Besides translations of countless volumes, Guru Padmasambhava had concealed so many secret treasures known as 'Terma' to be discovered in future times.

In the same way as the Buddhism overshadowed the lives of people since the reign of king Songtsen Gampo, once there used to have a time prior to this when every aspect of life was influenced by the teachings of Bon religion. Looking at the Bonpo literatures, we could not understand that 2125 years ago twelve native Bonpos enthroned a man who descended down the hill of Lhari Gyangtho in the fertile valley of Yarlung Tsangpo, the cradle of Tibetan civilization, by carrying him on their neck and name him as 'Gyalpo Nyatri Tsenpo' or the 'neck enthroned king' and made him as the first Tibetan king. Professor Namkhai Norbu is of the view that Bon religion was

well established at the time when Nyatri Tsenpo was enthroned. The domination of Bon religion upon the life of the Tibetan people was so much that even great historians like Amdo Gedun Choephel agree that even the very name of the country 'Bod' for Tibet in Tibetan language could have been derived from the name of the native religion 'Bon'. During those days Bon was divided into such sects as Chhashen, Nangshen, Sishen and also like Choekyi Lhabon, Dronghi Durbon, Yangdhagpai Sempa etc. Bon records also tell that during the time of Nyatri Tsenpo there lived twelve highly reputed Bonpo scholars who were famous for their mastery in their respective fields of specialization such as Tibetan medicine, astrology, handicraft and the like.

Under the patronage of the ninth king Gyalpo Pudhe Chungyal Bon religion reached at its zenith. During his time it is said that so many texts were translated from Shangshung language into Tibetan. He is reputed to have invited one hundred scholars at a time and some of the most famous Bonpo scholars he invited from Shangshung were Shangshung Lhade, Khyungpo Mukhyung Gyen and Lhakhyung Gyen. They taught the people how to make divinations (mo gyagpa), how to worship spirits (Lha solwa), how to exorcise evil spirits (De donpa) and how to practise Bon religion in general (Bon jepa). Pudhe Chungyal ran his state administration through the medium of 'Drung dhang deu Bon sum' which means that he ran the administration by simplifying the basic teachings of the Bon religion he brought much economic prosperities as it was during his reign that lands were first ploughed for fields, irrigation system was developed and the science of metallurgy was began to practise.

According to Tibetan history (Gyalrab) as well as Buddhist chronicles (Choejung). Buddhism first came to Tibet during the time of its 28th king Lha Thothori Nyentsen when some Buddhist texts and gold stupas were landed on the roof of Yumbu Lagang Palace. But having no means to read the contents of the scripts the king named them as 'Dhamchoe Nyenpo Sangwa' or the secret treasures and preserved them within his own palace and worshipped them secretly. In his book, Political History of Tibet, Tibetan historian T.W. Shakabpa says that Lha Thothori Nyentsen was born in the year 173 A.D. and that when he was 60 years of age those holy objects dropped upon his palace. This historic event took place in the year 233 A.D. which corresponds with the 777th death anniversary of Lord Buddha. According to Shakabpa this year was recognised by the government of Tibet as the year of the first establishment of Buddhism in Tibet and in commemoration of it this year was printed on the Tibetan legal currency. During this time two Indian pandits Pandit Lijin and Pandit Lithisi along with a translator Lotsawa Losemtsho visited the court of Lha Thothori Nyentsen and gave him religious sermons. But having no written scripts in Tibet at that time they have no choice but to return back to their land. However, some people believe that those two were the first Indian scholars to have visited the land of Tibet.

However, the real establishment of Buddhism in Tibet came into effect during the time of the 33rd monarch, Chogyal Songtsen Gampo, who is known as the greatest king of Tibet when he invented the Tibetan written script through his famous minister, Thonmi Sambhota, for the purpose of preserving teachings of the Buddha. In the year 633 A.D. the king sent sixteen Tibetan boys to India with a lavish gifts of

gold for studying the language of India (Gyaghar gyi ke) out of whom one boy came back with outstanding results. He was so good in his studies that his Indian masters gave him the name Thonmi Sambhota which in Sanskrit means 'Thonmi, the good Tibetan' because he came from the village of Thon in Tibet. Back home king Srongtsen Gampo at once accepted him as his Guru and provided him the palace of Nyangdren Phaphogkhai Kukhar Maru' for his residence in which Nyalpa Thonmi Anu's son, Sambhota, reshaped the history of Tibet by inventing the Tibetan script based on Devanagrik script (Legjar Lhayi ke) and formulated the Tibetan alphabet on the basis of Sanskrit as well as made an entirely new Tibetan grammar which has been in effective use for the last 13 centuries upto this day. For those of us who profess the Tibetan form of Buddhism the great deeds of this genius pervades every aspect of our life in the same way as the scientific genius of Thomas Alpha Edison pervades our life right from the electric bulb to the cinema hall. Songtsen Gampo's contributions for the development of Buddhism does not end here. His other deeds like inviting of two royal princesses from Nepal and China, the constructions of Tsuglakhangs and lhakhangs in and around Lhasa for the spread of Buddhism are so great that it requires much more time and space to state about them.

But the Bon scholars do not agree with the theory that the present form of Tibetan written language was invented by Thonmi Sambhota. They feel that there must had been a written form of language in Tibet during the time of Srongtsen Gampo which was based on the latter of Shangshung called 'Shangshung Maryig'. Though they are ready to agree that the existing written language of Tibet based on 'Shangshung Maryig' might have been in a crude form and that Thonmi Sambhota might have refined and polished that existing language, they are not ready to believe that Thonmi Sambhota invented the Tibetan alphabet for the first time. Rev. Namkhai Norbu, a renowned Bonpo scholar, in his book titled 'Necklace of Zhi' argues that Tibetan written language based on 'Shangshung Maryig' was in existence even during the time of Tibet's first king Nyatri Tsenpo. He feels that during that time the founder of Bon religion, Tonpa Sherab Miwo, visited Central Tibet and gave extensive preachings on the Bon religion in places like kongpo. Taking this as a reason he says that without having a language that was in written form at that time it was not just possible for the human memories only to remember all those extensive teachings of the Bon Master.

Both the parties who support that Thonmi Sambhota made the Tibetan alphabet as well as those who oppose it have interesting evidences to prove and illustrate their own point of view. While this could be a subject of thorough research for the future scholars, presently one must not fail to appreciate the magnitude of this man's contribution for the very reason that whatever culture and religion we have today are preserved in a language that is his gift.

During the time of Tibet's 41st king, Chogyal Triralpachen, Buddhism was at its highest peak. Under his reign extensive revision were done upon the translations that were already made, catalogues of Buddhist texts were prepared, Tibetan written language was restructured and repolished as 'Ke sarche kyi tenla phab' and out of respect the state provided seven families each to a monk. But those activities of the

monarch angered the Bonpo ministers and the clash between supporters of those two faiths culminated with the assassination of the king in 841 A.D. by two of his Monpo ministers Be Tagna and Chokro Lhalung in collaboration with his own brother Lang Dharma who at once ascended upon the Tibetan throne as the 42nd king. During his short reign Gyalpo Lang Dharma destroyed Buddhism to such an extent that he nearly uprooted it from the soil of Tibet. But in 846 A.D. Lhalung Palgyi Dorjee, a meditator in Drag Yerpa cave, assassinated Gyalpo Lang Dharma by shooting an arrow right into the heart, thereby putting an end to the dynastic rule in Tibet. With the fall of Lang Dharma, Tibet was thrown into a state of anarchism in which the entire nation was fragmented into many petty kingdoms which is known as 'Bhod silbur gyurpa'. Buddhism was able to revive only after the arrival of the famous Indian Pandit Jowoje Palden Atish Dipankara Srijana to Tholing Monastery in the year 1040 A.D.

Thus, what I have stated above is a short account of how Buddhism and Bon lived and flourished together side by side through the long corridors of the Tibetan history right up to its last dynastic ruler, Gyalpo Langdhar. Whatever the antithetic attitudes of the followers of these two religions against each other, I feel that there is much more common feature in the teachings of these two religions than what we feel and see. Even though things like the way of practices or the system of explanations may differ from each other. But what I have seen is that basic principles of the teachings of both the religions like Four Noble Truths, Wheel of Life, Hell and Heaven, Sin and Virtue are essentially the same. Whatever the differences between these two religions, both of them have equally influenced our culture and way of living and hence I feel that in order to have a better understanding of our own culture it is important to study both Buddhism as well as Bon. Buddhist centres are everywhere. But for the Bon we have a Bon Cultural Centre at Solan in Himachal Pradesh where they publish books on Bon religion. Right here in Sikkim we have one Bon monastery named Shurishing Yungdrung Bon Monastery at Kewzing in South Sikkim which was constructed by a Bonpo Lama Rev. Yungdrung Tsultrim who is a resident of Gangtok.

Finally, I hope that this small write up of mine about Buddhism and Bon may benefit those interested who are not aware of this hidden fact.