THE MISSING CONTEXT OF CHOS

—NIRMAL C. SINHA

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 onrushing 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 intense discussion" with several eminent Tibet 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 (कृष्ण सत्य चुड़ा), 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—कर्मम्, नरसन्त्वर्तम्, ज्ञानिन्वत्तम्, निर्माणिभिदम्, अज्ञानिभिदम्, विश्वस्थितिः, अश्वेताद्वितैः, भविष्यिभिदम्, कृङ्गिभिदम्, अहैतुर्विदम्—(Isha xyleograph, 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 stupes, temples and monasteries or on prayer wheels, images and instruments of rituals is that about all things springing from cause and liberation thereof. ज्ञातासकलेन्द्रे गृहं विश्वास्तरयोऽस्मिनं ज्ञातासमाग्निः। इति। It is called लोकस्थलिशीला, that is, ये प्रत्येक लोक स्थलीशीला है। तथा वहा दो निरस्त्र क्षण का वाद्य मधुराभ्यायः। 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. Mouiel-Williams and Apte), the social 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 Choic for Dharma. A scholar of ancient Indian political
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, 1956). No
less than three words from Western terminology, namely,
just, lex and rect, 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 Dharmasastha (Pouma, 1936-62).

The word Dharma is derived from root dhar (q) 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, Vaishyas and Sudras and
thus created "the excellent form dharma: the kshatra of the
kshatra; therefore there is nothing higher than the dharma;
therefore even a weak man 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".

S २७ आपस्त्र तत संबंधः: सन्त्र अपलकता तत्सपि तु वैयात्म अवस्था अर्थ
हूं पुष्टं तमालोक पुष्टं पुरुस्तकोर अवस्था अर्थात् तुष्प या
राज्ञिन यो वै व पायं: यास ये तु तृत्य यो तथा तृत्य अर्थात् अर्थात्
उपर्य भवति श्री इर्ष्र वा देहात साय कालिक देहात हि एव राज्यं अवस्था अर्थात्। The sense of
paramountcy of ORDER (moral and physical) in the scheme of
universe is traced back to the most ancient Indo-Iranian rita
观念。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 cate-
gories 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' (Rajadharmā) and
the king discharging such duty became 'the religious king
(Dharmarāja) .
In ancient India Dharmaraja seems to have been a royal title of higher rank than M. raja or M. rajadhariyaj. There is some epigraphic evidence of the composite title Dharmaraja. Choss-rgyal and Chos-rgyal Chompo are most perfect renderings of Dharmaraja and Dharma-rasāja giving justice both to Sanskrit etymology and Tibetan syntax.

In Tibetan tradition the kings from Stong-brtan-gsampo to Rab-pon-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-stong-lde-btsan’. 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 (Dogen 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 Stong-brtan-gsampo princes from Nyatso (in eastern Tibet) carved out a kingdom in the land of the Lechpas and established Chos as the state religion. Appropriate the first great king of Sikkim, Phuntsog rivam-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-rgyal, the Manchu Emperors, though conceited to be some sort of incarnations of Maha-yon (Mangsri), do not feature in Tibetan records as Chos-rgyal.

The first and greatest Chos-rgyal (Dharmaraja) of Tibetan tradition is Asoka (Mya-rnam-rgyal). Besides as in Indian tradition the epithet Chos-rgyal came to be applied to Sangs-rgyas (Buddha) and gShin-rje (Yasa). 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 a 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-his 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. Tibetan no doubt felt that way and accepted the exposition of Chos by Kamsashala the Indian in preference to that by Hsuhung the Chinese, towards the end of the eight century after Christ. For Tibet that fixed add context of her Dharma.

The context is wide large in Kanjan and Tanjur where a title is first announced “in the language of India” (rgyas-par-skad-du). It is confusing to reverse the precedence and say, as Ekvall does (p.252), “Byang-chub sems-dpal, commonly termed Bodhisattva”. Certainly the altruistic doctrine of Bodhisatva found better expression in Tibet than in India owing to the more favorable 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.7). 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-hug) or to the root, namely, Prajnaparamita (Shes-rab-kyi pho-rol-tu-phrul-pa). In his novel study of Tibetan Buddhism which has missed the context of Chos, the Indian concepts of Trisatna (dKon-mchog-gsum), Trikaya (sKu-gsum) or Tridhatu (Kham-gsum) attain the Sunyata (sTong-pa-nYid) in a special sense.

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1. In the first stage of the encounter between Bön and Buddhism, the term Chos was used for both religions. Thus, Chos, Vangspa Chos, or Seng-rgyas kyi Chos, was some unspecified for Buddhism of Tibet: Tibetan Printed Rolls (Rome 1940) Vol II and The Tombs of the Tibetan Kings (Rome 1954). After the final triumph of Buddhism Chos was as good as Seng-rgyas kyi Chos. Bön on the other hand came to be expressed as Bön Chos or simply Bön. See also note 5.


3. "Phag-pa ci kyi Kalu-lki Chos-rgyal Mi-riang (готова ки Чош Ргьял Миринг) Counsell for the King". This reference has been promingly tested for me by my pupil Jamyang Küns Nyen Tukun. See also note 5.

4. e.g. Arthur Wright (USA) and E. Zürcher (Holland). It is relevant to note that the Indian Sinologist Prabha Bagchi (d. 1956) was foremost in the theory of Buddhist conquest of China, proposed by Euro-persian Buddhists and acclaimed by Indian scholars who looked upon Buddhism as China's relationship with Buddhism, 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 inapplicable to loan words" (Hsu, p.18), Bön accommodated the Sanskrit word Dharma (धर्म) and eventually translated it to Mongolian. A translation of Kalu-lki was named Dzamapala, v. Harus-deb-cher (The Red Annals; Saklat 1961, John 188).