

BOOK REVIEW by Lama Anagarika Govinda

MYSTIC ART OF ANCIENT TIBET

by Blanche Christine Olschak in Collaboration with Geshe Thupten Wangyal. 224 pages, 142 illustrations in colour, 372 black-and-white illustrations.

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Since the Chinese invasion of Tibet, the complete destruction of its ancient culture and the subsequent exodus of a substantial part of its population—including thousands of monks and many of the most prominent spiritual leaders—Tibetan art has burst upon the world like a revelation from another planet: as something both strange and fascinating, mysterious and beautiful. It has captured the imagination of art-lovers and truth-seekers alike, though few of them had any knowledge of the deeper meaning or significance of Tibetan art. The few works of Tibetan iconography that existed before the Chinese invasion, were hardly more than dry catalogues of Tibetan art-collections or mere classifications of icons, written by scholars (and for scholars) who had no insight into the psychology or religious experience that was expressed in these works. Only in recent years attempts have been made to enter into the spirit of Tibetan art with the help of religious texts and meditative sadhanas, instead of merely regarding it from the point of view of an art-historian or from a purely aesthetic standpoint. One of the first pioneers in this direction was Prof. Tucci in his magnificent work on Tibetan Painted Scrolls' (Thankas) and Dr. Olschak follows closely in his footsteps. Her "Mystic Art of Ancient Tibet" is a real feast for the eyes and a gold-mine of information, in a clear and readable style. The reproductions are excellent, both in colour and in black- and -white. The latter are mainly reproduced from the publications of the International Academy of Indian Culture in New Delhi, founded by the late Prof. Raghu Vira and his son, Prof. Lokesh Chandra, who among them have collected and published an enormous amount of iconographical and scriptural material of Tibetan Buddhism, unequalled by any other individual scholar in the world. Without this source-material half of the present work would not have been possible. This, however, does not minimize our admiration for the excellent way, in which Dr. Olschak and Geshe Thupten Wangyal have used and interpreted this material in conjunction with the outstandingly beautiful colour-reproductions of rare Thankas, frescoes and bronze-images, etc., partly from the author's won collection (of which many items were

acquired during her travels in Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal) as well as from other private and public collections. Tibet is a country of strong, luminous colours and clear outlines. The mystic art of Tibet, therefore, does not favour vagueness of any kind, but demands clear definition of design and colour.

The backbone of Tibetan pictorial art is the mastery and refinement of its line-work, the accuracy of drawing and the highly developed technique of woodblock carving and printing. Though colour lends a new dimension and is never used in a naturalistic way, but to indicate spiritual qualities and even directions of an inner space-dimension, according to strict laws of traditional symbolism, even the mere line-work of uncoloured brush-drawings or woodcuts are capable of conveying a world of vivid reality without ever being realistic in the sense of merely imitating things or lands-capes in a naturalistic way. There are all the characteristic elements of our visual world, without distortion or exaggeration, and yet they depict more than the eye can see, namely the inner life of man and all that surrounds him, in a vision that shows the essential oneness of both, the seer and the seen, which become one in the artists or the creative visionary's experience. Mountains and clouds, waterfalls and trees, flowers and rocks are intimately related to the human and divine figures of which they seem to be emanations rather than something that merely surrounds them casually. Even the most phantastic or imaginative pictures breath a sense of reality that rightly could be called 'surrealistic'.

A good example are the eight manifestations of Padmasambhava (at the beginning of the book), which are so exquisit in execution and so rich in detail that the reader would have liked to know more of its contents and the mutual relationship of these pictures. They are conceived as a ninefold mandala with Padmasambhava in his best-known form in the centre and with his eight manifestations grouped around him. For some unknown reason only seven of them are given here besides the central image which shown Padmasambhava in the royal robes of the King of Sahor, combined with the emblems of spiritual power and accompanied by his two main disciples, the Princess Mandarava and the Dakini Yeshe Tsogyal. About his head are the Dhyani-buddhas who indicate the line of his spiritual descent: Samantabhadra, Amitabha and Avalokitesvara (in the note accompanying the picture, mistaken for the White Tara), while the lower part of the picture shows two of Padmasambhava's contemporaries and helpers in the foundation of the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery (Samye), namely the Tibetan King Tisong-detsan and the Indian monk-scholar Santarakshita, as well as two fearful protecting deities. The following pictures of the same set show a similar pattern of conception and composition; in the highest place the

spiritual teacher who initiated Padmasambhava into the sadhana which made him assume the particular form in which he appears as the main figure in each of these pictures, while below and around him his disciples perform various acts of miraculous powers or are seen immersed in meditation. Before each of the main figures of Padmasambhava's manifestation appear one by one the figures of the 'offering goddesses' with their respective emblems, the lamp, the incense-bowl, the perfumed conchshell, the mirror, the lute, etc. All these details, which combine his torical, mythological and symbolical elements, give these pictures their specific meaning — far beyond their aesthetic value. Probably the shortness of available space prevented the Author to go into a more detailed description. By the way, there is a small error in the note accompanying the first of these pictures: the feather on Padmasambhava's cap is not a "peacock feather" (as can be seen very clearly) but that of an eagle, symbolizing the "soaring mind" of the great guru. There is nothing in such pictures that is not significant in one way or another.

In contrast to the refinement of these pictures and to the rest of the paintings and woodcuts reproduced in this book, is the drawing purporting to represent the ideal proportions of the Buddha-image. That this is not the case, can be observed by anybody who compares this clumsy and stunted drawing with the noble proportions of the statues, thankas and frescoes reproduced in this book — nothing to say of the classical period of Tibetan art, as exemplified by the Western Tibetan style, introduced by the famous Lotsava Rinchenzangpo (967-1052 A.D.). A beautiful example of this style is shown on p.53, where the Dhyani-Buddhas Aksobhya and Ratnasambhava are depicted. The fact that they are shown with their respective throne-bearers, the elephant (indicating Aksobhya) and the horse (indicating Ratnasambhava) makes it unlikely that they represent "Shakyamuni's heavenly manifestations", as claimed in the explanatory note. Also the reproduction of a fresco-painting (belonging to the same tradition and probably the same century) does not portray "Buddha Shakyamuni sitting under the tree of enlightenment", but Prince Siddhartha, long before he became a Buddha, sitting under the Roseapple Tree, while his father, King Suddhodana, performed the plow ceremony. The figures in the branches of the tree are, therefore, not "Dhyani-Buddhas, who symbolize the fivefold sublime wisdom", but quite obviously five Hindu ascetics. And the "devotees", who surround the young Siddhartha, are the very self-same ascetics, who have descended from the tree in order to pay their respects to the meditating Bodhisattva, who by the power of his concentration arrested them in mid-air on their flight to the Himalayas. The note then goes on to explain the significance of "the black pig" (though the pig in this fresco fragment is a clear yellow!) as "the emblem of ignorance, symbolically struck by the arrow of highest comprehension that penetrates the matrix of all spiritual poisons, such

as envy, hatred and greed, which cause the endless repetition of earthly suffering." Here the author loses herself in private speculations, which have nothing to do with the story, which merely says that the Bodhisattva, contemplating the sufferings of the oxen cruelly forced under the yoke, while plowing, or of other animals, hunted and killed, finally fell into a state of deep absorption, which was so powerful that even the shadow of the tree under which he was seated, did not move and the above-mentioned ascetics were arrested in mid-air.—A beautiful fresco of the same scene existed in one of the ancient temples of Tsaparang, and a faithful copy of its (made by Li Gotami Govinda) is now in the possession of the Prince of Wales Museum of Bombay, where it is displayed in the centre of the Tibetan section of the museum.

On pages 18 and 19 the eight traditional types of Chortens, the Tibetan version of the ancient Buddhist Stupas of India, are depicted and described. It is said here that the tumuli of pre-Buddhist times had "Lingam erected on top of the [burial-] mound, symbolizing the saint's unification with the highest god"—and that the spire on the dome of a Chorten corresponds to this symbol and to the "enlightenment elevation on the heads of those who have reached Buddhahood. This seems to be a somewhat arbitrary view and all the more unconvincing, as it is in direct conflict with the historical evidence in regard to pre-historic tumuli as well as with the development of Buddhist Stupa Architecture.*

The idea of an "enlightenment elevation", besides, is of very late origin, and only shows that people had forgotten the original meaning of this iconographical peculiarity which distinguishes a Buddha from even his most enlightened disciples and followers.

It has nothing to do with the Buddha's enlightenment, but as the story of his life and the numerous pictorial representations of it unmistakably show, it records the very start of his religious career many long years *before* his enlightenment. The legend tells us that when he renounced the worldly life in search of truth—still far from enlightenment—he divested himself of his princely ornaments and with one stroke of the sword he cut off his long hair which he had gathered with his left hand above his head. Since that time, it is said, his hair remained in the same position and had never to be cut again.

From all this we can only assume that the Buddha never shaved his head, as it later became the custom among the monks and nuns

* Cfr. my monograph on "Some Aspects of Stupa Symbolism" Kitabistan, Allahabad & London, 1948. Also "Solar & Lunar Symbolism in the Development of Stupa Architecture", MARG, Bombay, 1950.

of his order, and it is most likely that he kept his hair in a knot on the top of his head, as it is even now-adays the custom among the Sikhs (who like the Buddha belong to the kshattriya caste) as well as many among the present-day yogis and sanyasis. This may be significant as an indication that whereas the Buddha represented the ideal of the homeless *sramana*, his successors became well-established and comfortably settled monastic communities, becoming more and more separated from normal human life and the contact with the people around them. As a reaction to this, the Siddhas took again to the homeless life of the yogin, and with them an entirely new religious movement, which greatly contributed to the Tantric form of Tibetan Buddhism, came into existence.

The Siddhas were held in such high esteem that the Mahasiddha Saraha was thought of being the guru of Nagarjuna, the famous philosopher of the Madhyamika School, who lived in the second century A.D. This, however, is not possible as none of the Siddhas is known to be earlier than the 7th century. According to Benoytosh Bhattacharyya (a recognized authority in this matter) Saraha was born around 633 A.D., and the Nagarjuna, who was said to be his pupil, was the Siddha and alchemist Nagarjuna. The claim that "Guru Saraha lived 2000 years ago" (p. 10) can, therefore, not be maintained.

The age of the Siddhas was the age of the unfoldment of the Tantric Path and the Diamond Vehicle, in which creative imagination became one of the most important tools of meditation, for which mandalas were of fundamental importance. The general patterns of these mandalas have been well described and illustrated in excellent colour as well as in black-and-white reproductions, which give an idea of the intricate nature of Tantric sadhanas and their profound symbolism. However, it is a pity that the most frequently used arrangement of the five Dhyani-Buddhas, on which the most typical Tibetan mandalas are based (as for instance those of the Bardo Thodol, "The Tibetan Book of the Dead"), is not even mentioned. The table in which the positions, colours, mudras, mantras, elements, faculties, throne-bearers and other symbols of the main figures of the mandala is shown, is exclusively based on one single sadhana (Guhyasamaja), without explaining that this is only one among other possible arrangements, depending on which of the Dhyani-Buddhas forms the key-figure of the mandala, comparable to the key note in a musical composition. In many of the most important mandalas, for instance, Vairocana is in the centre, while Aksobhya is in the east, representing the Mirror-like Wisdom & the element water, whose surface, if undisturbed, reflects like a mirror, and is in this capacity the symbol of the *alaya-vijnana*, the universal consciousness in a state of perfect transparency and tranquility. Aksobhya's throne-bearer or vehicle is the elephant. In relationship to the element water the elephant symbolizes the monsoon cloud, in relationship to Aksobhya's

gesture of touching the earth (bhūmisparśamudrā) the elephant symbolizes steadfastness, unshakeability and tranquility. This is significant, because it shows that the same symbol can have different meanings, according to different levels of understanding or consciousness (physical, sensual, mental, psychological, spiritual, etc), according to the context or in relationship to other symbols. In view of this multi-dimensionality of.

For the same reason, the chart (pp.20-21) which shows the relationship of the energy-spheres (Cakras) of the body and the corresponding Dhyani-Buddhas cannot be regarded as generally valid, because it does not take into consideration that it depends on the context of the particular sadhana which Dhyani-Buddha is associated with which Cakra. This kind of over-simplification can only lead to misunderstandings and does not do justice to the flexibility of Tibetan meditational systems and the psychological refinement of the Buddhist attitude, especially in its Tantric practices.

In view of the multi-dimensionality of symbols, as mentioned above, we also have to be careful in our definition of symbolical relationships or even in defining the character of individual symbols, because any rigidly systematized representation goes at the cost of their vitality and their inherent dynamism. For this reason it is also dangerous to take over outworn, stereotyped concepts of symbols, which do not reflect the particular meaning applied to them in a given tradition. It is, for instance, misleading and unjustified to speak of the Vajra as "thunderbolt" in the context of the Buddhist Vajrayana, unless we are prepared to call it the "Thunderbolt Vehicle" instead of the Diamond Vehicle.

Since Buddhists have been perfectly clear in what they mean by "vajra", as explained in one of the most important Mahayana texts, known as the "Diamond Sutra" (Vajracchedikā Sūtra) and since even the Tibetan translation of the term "vajra" reveals it as "the master or lord of stoness" (rDo = stone; rJe = master), i.e. the diamond, — there is no justification in perpetuating a misconception that had its origin in equating the meaning of this term with that of its vedic synonym which had quite different connotations and associations.

The Buddhist term "vajra" symbolizes the highest spiritual qualities, namely, luminosity, transparency, indestructibility and firmness. In the latter capacity it is related to Aksobhya's steadfastness and immutability, symbolized by his elephant, while the first two qualities correspond to the liminosity of the 'mirror' (reflective and contemplative consciousness) and the transparency of the element water. Therefore, Aksobhya is often depicted with the Vajra as the emblem of his spiritual

'family', and as such it would be more correctly interpreted as the "diamond sceptre". Otherwise it would be better to leave this term untranslated, after having once explained its meaning.

In a similar way it would have been better to retain the term "Dakini" (Tib. : mKhah-hgro-ma), because Dakinis are far more than "Cloud-Fairies", since they can represent divine as well as demonical beings, associated not only with the heavenly regions, but just as much with the horrors of the cremation places. They are not sweet fairy-tale beings, but fierce powers of the knowledge of life and death, as well as of inspiration the leads us beyond both: inspiration in the sense of the Greek word "daimon".

However, these considerations should not deflect us from the value and the merits of this book, which by far outway its occasional shortcomings in the interpretation of so vast and complicated a material. The beautiful reproductions of rare and significant works of Tibetan art have been chosen with understanding and true appreciation of their artistic, spiritual and historical value. They have been explained and commented upon in a competent and lucid manner, so that even those who are not familiar with the subject, can understand and enjoy the rich fare offered in this magnificent volume. For the student of Tibetan Buddhist culture this book is a safe guide, especially as all technical terms and proper names have not only been given according to their pronunciation but also in their Tibetan spelling and with their Sanskrit equivalents. The publishers too have to be thanked for the excellent get-up and the great care they have taken in every detail. A volume like this will be a permanent asset to any library, because its contents will never be outdated.