MEMORIES OF TSHURPHU

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The death of His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa brought vividly to mind the several occasions when I had the privilege of meeting him and in particular two visits to his great monastery of Tshurphu.

The first was in 1946 on a journey from Lhasa to Gyantse by way of Yukung and Nyemo. I was not some four miles from the monastery by the Chandro who escorted me to the Rinpoche’s summer house in a pleasant grove of willows a little way from the monastery. A very large and comfortably carpeted tent had been pitched with, in the middle, a massive brown bedhead standing like an island in an ocean. The Yab Kusmo, the Rinpoche’s father, entertained me to lunch after which I was received by the Rinpoche himself in his bright, gleaming room looking out on a little flower garden in which stalked a fine peacock. His room was full of clocks of all kinds and was hung with cages of the birds he loved—budgerigars and canaries.

The Rinpoche was then about 23 years old, a large, calm young man with a ready smile and sense of humour. We enjoyed a long friendly conversation; and then, as I had to leave early on the following day, there was time for only a short visit to the monastery. On the next day I found that the Rinpoche’s kindness had preceded me and that tents were pitched for my party at the halting place in Klucho Drak, a wide upland grazing ground scattered with yak. To the west, not far from my camp, the Lhobong Ma—sho flowed northwards towards the Karmapa Zhama monastery of Yangzapten about 30 miles distant and so far for a visit. Beyond the river on the far side of the plain, plumes of steam rose from geysers of hot water. The region is now a source of geothermal power for Lhasa.

The grandeur and interest of Tshurphu Gompa, of which I had previously heard little and which had not, I think, been seen by a foreigner before, determined me to visit it again and Visit to Tshurphu. I was able to do so in 1956 to say farewell to His Holiness before finally leaving Tibet.

After so many years my memory, even with the help of notes made
at the time, can only sketch inadequately a few salient features of the great monastery with its stately chapels and halls, wonderful images, frescoes and thangkas, and religious treasures of all kinds. I hope that some learned monk from Tshurphu now living at Rumtek may be moved to do for his old monastery what Dzasa Jigme Tashi-nying has done for the Jokhang at Lhasa and draw a detailed ground plan locating all the temples, chapels and so on, and listing their contents.

In the meanwhile, let me attempt to describe what I can. Although I have heard no definite news of the fate of Tshurphu in the Cultural Revolution, I fear that the past tense must be used. The monastery stood in the shelter of a scrub—covered hill on the north side of a high, bare and narrow valley. In front, flowed a small tributary stream of the Tolung river. After passing through a narrow gate in the high wall surrounding the monastery one came to a wide paved courtyard with building on three sides, the west side being open. In the center stood a stone pillar dating from the reign of Ralpachen and describing the foundation of a temple at Changbu in Tolung. It is opposite a flight of steep stone steps leading to a doorway, with a chain curtain, into what was perhaps a Gonkhang. I wondered whether this was the original site of the early temple but was told later that the pillar was formerly opposite the main assembly hall, further inside the monastery. No one seemed to know about the Ralpachen’s temple or the name Changbu.

The principal temple, lofty and dark, contained the famous brass image of Shriya Muni, known as the Ornament of the World, made in about 1925 on the instructions of the second Zha-Nag hierarch, Karma Pakshi. It is about 60 feet high and enshrined relics of the Buddha and of several early religious teachers. 60 feet high brass image enshrined in principal temple I had the impression that its head was rather flat. There is a well-known story that Karma Pakshi found the image was leaning to one side and that he sat in meditation beside it and by inclining his body brought the image to follow his movement back to the perpendicular.

The roof above the head of the image is surmounted by a gilded pagoda-courlet (rgya phibs) which is said to be part of a very large
such roof dated from India by the Mongols and abandoned by them near
the China border. Karma Pakshi found it but
could not bring it all; the portion he did manage
to bring was adapted to cover the head of the
great image. Its rather dark colour was said to be
due to its many vicissitudes. In the temple there is a small chapel
of Du-sun Khyenpa, the first hierarch and founder of the monastery
which is perhaps the oldest part of the whole series of buildings.

Another gilded roof surmounts a great hall in which were many Choten
tombs containing the ashes and other relics of former hierarchs and other
Karmapa Lamas. Fourteen of them were tall and massive, perhaps 40 feet
high. That of Du-sun Khyenpa with a simple clay-covered dome decorated lightly with painted
figures reminded me of the tomb of Asa at
Karmapas Nyingthang. Round its base were some ornamental
vases. Karma Pakshi's tomb was even more austere
and its uncoloured clay dome was without any sort of
decoration. The tombs of later hierarchs were rather more elaborate but
were mostly of black-painted clay with golden ornamentation, much simpler
and more impressive than the lavish golden tombs of, for example, the
Drgung lamas at Yangri Gompa or Drgung Thil. There were also tombs
and reliquaries of some Red Hat Karmapas and some of the Pano incarnations including the great historian Tsaglag Thargya.

I was also shown many fine gilded images including one of the
Ninth Zhabdrung (Red Hat) Lama and always to radiate noticeable
warmth also one of Lama Zangpo who at one time created difficulties
for the Karmapas but was reconciled to Du-sun
Many gilded images Phye-nma, and a very gaunt image of Milarepa
of Red Hat Lamas said to be self-cassued, very different from
the sturdy figure carved in shi-moclos born by
a previous incarnation and kept with other previous images in the
Rinpoche's private rooms.

Whereas I went the monastery was clean and well kept and the
monks had an air of quiet discipline and seriousness.

Over the entrance to the principal temple is a wooden tablet painted
blue and gold, given by the Chinese emperor Yung Lo and inscribed
with his name. The Emperor had a special devotion for the fifth incarnation, Dr-o-ten she-kpa as can be seen in the remarkable painted scroll which I have described and translated in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1909. It is about 50 feet long by 2½ feet in height and has panels of elegant painting illustrating the miracle performed by the Lama on each of 22 days during his visit to China in 1607; alternating panels in gold lettering describe in five languages the subject of each painting.

There are also treasures from the earlier connection of the Zha Lang Lamas with the Mongol Yuan dynasty, porcelain vases, a carved ivory panel in the Rinpoché's room, bronze images, and a great gold seal inscribed in "Hunyin" with a dragon on the handle. This seal is, I believe, largely preserved at Rumtek and examination should discover whether it is that given by Mongke Khagpa to Karma Pakshi and later taken from him by Kublai and restored to the Lhama Rangchung Dorje by the Emperor Togrul Timur in 1331. I was also shown letters from Chinese Emperors and many other treasures including palpal-deal manuscripts.

One lasting memory of my second visit is the graciousness of His Holiness in offering to perform the wearing the Black Hat for our party. It is now fairly well-known in Europe and America that at that time it was something of a mystery even in Black Hat wearing Lhasa, and my staff were agreed in the performance. We were all deeply impressed by the solemn ritual with its bursts of thrilling music and by the grave concentration with which the Rinpoche performed it. At the end, when he gave me a scarf of blessings, which I still have, I was greatly surprised and moved to be greeted by him with the touching of foreheads (drol-thog). And with that in my mind I join in the mo-tur-du god-dré-de, the prayer that his reincarnation may speedily appear for the benefit of sentient beings.