

## Working with Buddhists

Alexander W. Macdonald

Editorial note. – Alexander William Macdonald is a doyen of Tibetan and Nepalese studies. Since 1949 he has been living in France where he held, until his retirement, the positions of a *directeur de recherche* at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and professor at the Laboratoire d'Ethnologie et de Sociologie Comparative of the Université de Paris in Nanterre. Both as the author of an impressive number of publications and as an influential teacher, Macdonald was and still is a rich source of inspiration and encouragement for many of his younger colleagues in and outside France. Educating a new generation of scientists who have successfully combined anthropology with philological studies is just one of his lasting accomplishments. The following article is an extract from a draft of his autobiography.

A Sikh friend in Delhi, who is active in the entourage of H.H. the Dalai Lama, asked me to explain to her how it happened that I became interested in and involved with Buddhism. This was my answer:

I was born in Scotland, near Dundee, in 1923. Up till the age of 18, I had practically no contact with Buddhists or Buddhism. On Sundays my parents attended fairly regularly the local Presbyterian Church and were friends of the minister. Around the age of 13, I was sent as a boarder to a Public School in England and there I attended the Church of England chapel services daily. At the age of 15 or so, it was customary to be "confirmed"; this little ceremony entitled one to participate later in Holy Communion. Both in England and in Scotland I refused to be "confirmed" despite some parental pressure. The mythological aspects of Christian theology were to me most distasteful and if, at that stage in my life, I had acquired any beliefs these seemed to change almost every week.

Since September 1939 Britain had been at war with Germany. As soon as I was old enough, I volunteered for service in the Indian Army. I wanted to travel and from what I had read, India seemed to be a fascinating country: I wanted to experience at first hand other forms of warfare than those which consisted in being bombed in Britain by Germans.

So, in 1942, I was sent to India as an officer cadet at Bangalore. There we were worked very hard physically and had little leisure in which to speculate on Man's place in the Universe. We had little contact with Indian civilians

outside the cantonment; but we had Urdu lessons with a munshi (teacher) at 6.30 a.m. several days a week. I began to read whatever I could find concerning contemporary Indian politics and was fascinated by the activities of Dr. Ambedkar.

After six months' intensive training at Bangalore, I became, in January 1943, a Second Lieutenant in the 10th Gurkha Rifles whose Regimental Centre was, in those days, situated at Alhilal in the Kangra Valley. I found this part of India very beautiful and liked the climate. As we were foot-soldiers there were long training marches across the countryside and through its villages and gradually I came to know more about the functioning of local Indian society. There were also daily lessons in Nepali (Khaskura); sometimes it was the British Colonel commanding the centre who taught the classes. Our recruits were mainly Rais and Limbus, hill peasants from eastern Nepal. In time I began to find their conversation more interesting than that of my fellow-officers. The only Indian officer in the centre was the Medical Doctor. A month's leave in July in Lahul brought me in contact near Kyelang with the first Tibetans I had ever seen.

In September I was sent to Burma. The 4th battalion of 10 G.R. was part of the 20th Indian Division which was then in the Kabaw Valley. From the time when the Japanese at Kalewa started their advance on Imphal up till the day on which the Kohima Road was re-opened I was actively involved in the fighting; on that day I was flown out of Imphal to hospitals at Comilla, then to Dacca. I was very ill and had been slightly wounded but the war in the jungle had not provoked in me any religious change of heart.

After sick-leave in Kashmir and a spell in "V" Force<sup>1</sup>, again in Burma, where I shared the company of Nagas, Kachins, Chins, Shans among others, I transferred to Force 136. From April to September 1945, I was the military advisor to a group of partisans of Aung San's Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) operating north of Toungoo in Southern Burma. These partisans were Burmese Buddhists, plainsmen for the most part with a sprinkling of ex-students of Rangoon University who had been exposed to Marxist ideology. I was the only foreigner among hundreds of Burmese and as I lived and fought alongside them during some months we naturally talked together a lot and not only about the local political and military situation.

My previous attempts to know what "my" Rais and Limbus thought about the war had always turned short. Their Jemadars and Subedars were also as uptight if not more so than their men. All Gurkhas were mercenaries: life in highland Nepal was hard and poverty widespread. So service with the British whether in Italy, North Africa or Burma provided regular food, reasonable pay and the opportunity to see something of the world outside

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<sup>1</sup> "V" Force operated fighting patrols and collected intelligence deep in enemy territory.

Nepal. Gurkhas submitted to discipline and encadrement with good grace for they knew that after demobilization and their return to their hill-villages their pensions would be paid by the British. The fights and wrongs of British Imperialists were not of much interest to them. They were fairly relaxed Hindus with a distinct liking for blood-sacrifices which manifested itself in particular at Dashera. The Burmese were much less belligerent and did not share the Gurkha passion for rum. They were not mercenaries paid by the British to help prop up the Raj. They were nationalists, fighting for the future political independence of their country. At the start of the war many Burmese had hoped that the Japanese would help them to rid their country of the British. The leader of the AFPFL, Aung San, had at first collaborated with the Japanese, accompanying their troops when they entered Burma in January 1942. However the Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere in which the Japanese attempted to enrol by force large areas of South East Asia was rapidly revealed to be a sinister political fiction. Moreover, Japanese brutality in Burma had already aroused hatred among many elements of the population. So my first real contact with Buddhism occurred in a situation of conflict and violence: Burmese Buddhists were fighting against Japanese Shintoists and Buddhists. Zen also, as an Australian author has recently put it, was at war. The first lesson I therefore learnt about Buddhism was that it is not necessarily non-violent nor pacifist. On the 19th July, 1947 Aung San having achieved independence for his country was assassinated by political rivals.

In 1973 in Nepal I met Aung San's daughter in a former Rana Palace at Jawalakhel. Suu Kyi and her husband Michael Aris rapidly became good friends for me and whenever I visited Oxford I used to stay with them. The last time I saw Suu Kyi was at Oxford in March 1988. She had just heard on the phone that her mother had had an attack and she had decided to return to Rangoon to take care of her. We walked together across Oxford, Suu pushing her bicycle alongside her, and arguing about the political merits of Mahatma Gandhi's policy of non-violence. I remember saying laughingly to Suu that if she needed help in raising the hill areas in her favour and mobilising them against the Burmese military junta, I was a volunteer for the job who was not lacking in experience. I told her that I thought that non-violence could only be successful against relatively well-mannered people like the British.

When I went to Kalimpong in September 1958 I had spent nearly ten years in Paris studying under teachers such as Paul Mus, Paul Lévy, Rolf Stein, Louis Renou, Jean Filliozat, Louis Hambis. I had a fairly good knowledge of the names of Tibetan authors and book-titles. Marcelle Lalou, another of my mentors, did not speak Tibetan and in those days there were no Tibetans in Paris from whom I could learn the spoken language. I went to Kalimpong (West Bengal) with the intention of studying a Buddhist monastery and how it functioned and maintained itself economically. Three

months after my arrival in Kalimpong, the local situation changed dramatically. The Chinese colonialists intensified their military pressure on Tibet; Lhasa rose against them; the Dalai Lama fled to India, followed by nearly 100,000 Tibetans. These dramatic events forced me to change my projects. I had brought with me to India a photocopy of a Tibetan manuscript of the *ro-sgrung*, "The Stories of the Corpse", and I found locally another hand-written manuscript of these tales in the form of a long scroll. One day, in Kalimpong I had the chance to meet an illiterate storyteller and singer of the Tibetan *Gesar* epic from eastern Tibet, who agreed to my recording "his" oral version of the *ro-sgrung*. We worked together for eleven months and it was in this manner that I learned to speak Tibetan. I also became very good at spellings as I had to consult dictionaries intensively. Several years later I published two volumes in French containing translations and analyses of some of these stories.<sup>2</sup>

I think I succeeded in showing that they are not just translations of fragments of the Indian *vetālapañcavimśati* as had been previously supposed. Another personality who arrived in Kalimpong around this time was Don-brgyud Nyi-ma, the 8th Khams-sprul Rin-po-che. He set to work at once with his entourage to build a stupa on Durpin Dhara, a hill some distance outside the town. When I first met him, he asked me if there were any stupas or monasteries in France and whether the head of the state (at that time General de Gaulle) was a Buddhist. Shortly afterwards I learnt that this large and learned lama was the author of a recently composed chapter of the *Gesar* epic entitled '*Jar-gling*'. It had been inspired by rumours of the British war against Germany ('*Jar*') which had filtered into Tibet during the Second World War. I still possess a manuscript of this chapter written for me at my request, in *dbu-med*, by some of his 'Brug-pa Bka'-rgyud-pa monks. The Rin-po-che rapidly became my "root lama" (*mūl-guru*). I was to meet him again several years later when he had moved to the Kangra Valley with his community and before he died in 1980. Later with the help of Dvags-po Rin-po-che, I translated into French the *Guide to the Holy Places of Nepal*, composed by the 4th Khams-sprul, Bstan-'dzin Chos-kyi Nyi-ma (1730-1779). My French translation was later translated into English and is still consulted, I am told, by Newar guides conducting western tourists around Nepal Valley.

I have always considered that academic cooperation should not be restricted to Asian assistants helping western lecturers and professors to understand and to translate Asian texts into European languages. Moreover, the published results of cooperation, in the course of fieldwork, between anthropologists and informants from among the population they choose to study, are seldom read by any members of the population concerned. In an attempt to improve communications between the studying and the studied,

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<sup>2</sup> *Matériaux pour l'Etude de la Littérature Populaire Tibétaine*, vols. 1 and 2. Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie 1990 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

a Sherpa lama, Sangs-rgyas bstan-'dzin, and I decided to compose conjointly in Tibetan a short history of Buddhism (*Chos-byung*) in the Sherpa area of Nepal and a summary of the history of the Sherpa clans (*mes-rabs*). I also persuaded Sangs-rgyas bstan-'dzin to join his own autobiography (*rnam-thar*) to these two texts. The volume in question was reproduced photographically at Delhi and 200 copies in Tibetan format were donated to Ser-log dgon-pa, at Junbesi, in Nepal. The book<sup>3</sup> has since been used for the instruction of young pupils at the *dgon-pa* and for the teaching of Tibetan at the Ecole Nationale des Langues et Civilisations Orientales in Paris.

After Sangs-rgyas bstan-'dzin's death in 1990, my German friend and colleague Franz-Karl Ehrhard, who had also studied with him, and I, edited a posthumous work in Tibetan by our teacher entitled *Snowlight of Everest* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner 1992). Along with a short account of the Sherpas this work includes remarks on their behaviour-patterns (*spyod-lam*), marriage rituals (*bag-ma gtang-len*) and death ceremonies.

Some months after the initial exodus of refugees from Tibet, the Rockefeller Foundation in the U.S.A. generously donated funds so as to enable a limited number of Tibetans to go from India and Nepal to several countries in Europe – France, Germany, Holland, Italy (I have no note of the exact list) as well as to the U.K. and the U.S.A. in order to collaborate with western scholars in taking stock of the Tibetan holdings in their libraries. As far as I remember, the expenses of the Tibetans during their first one or two years abroad were also to be met by the Foundation. I became actively involved in the realization of this project. I saw a great deal of the Sa-skyapa family of Phun-tshogs pho-brang with whom I lived at certain periods in Darjeeling. We became close friends and many years after their move to Seattle we remained in contact.<sup>4</sup> At the request of Princess Sgrol-ma, the Sa-skyapa Bdag-mo, I once took her to listen to Mouloudji singing at the Echelle de Jacob in Paris.

Dvags-po Rin-po-che and Thub-bstan ("Thoupten") Phun-tshogs lived for some time in "my" house at Kalimpong and when they were chosen to come to France by Professor Stein, I accompanied them to Dharamsala so as to obtain the blessing of H.H. the Dalai Lama on their projected journey to the west. Both Dvags-po Rin-po-che and Thub-bstan Phun-tshogs have since published in French accounts of their lives in France. The Rin-po-che is now retired, after teaching for many years in Paris, and lives near Fontainebleau.

<sup>3</sup> *Documents pour l'Etude de la Religion et de l'Organisation Sociale des Sherpa*. Junbesi, Nanterre 1971. A curiously oblique reference to this work is to be found in S. B. Ortner: *Life and Death on Mt Everest*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999, p. 369.

<sup>4</sup> Jamyang Sakya and Julie Emery: *Princess from the Land of Snows*. Boston: Shambhala 1990.

A big step forward in the mutual cooperation of foreign students of Buddhism was taken in 1976 through the impetus given by Professor A.K. Narain who was then at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He succeeded in founding the International Association of Buddhist Studies. This association is truly international. It publishes a Journal twice a year and holds meetings periodically in different continents. For instance, I attended those held at Nalanda (India) and at Bologna (Italy). In 1990, I was elected General Secretary and organized the conferences held in Paris (France-UNESCO) in 1991 and in Mexico City in 1994 before handing over to Professor Oskar von Hinüber of the University of Freiburg. We have little or no money. The journal is kept going by subscribers but for the organization of larger and larger meetings we have to depend on generous invitations. In this context I would like to reiterate my thanks to Ananda W.P. Guruge who was in 1990 the Ambassador of Sri Lanka to France and to UNESCO; without his financial and material aid the 1991 meeting could never have taken place, nor the conference proceedings be published rapidly in 1992 in Colombo in English.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout my working life with Buddhists, I have always been impressed by the manner in which they helped one another. In conclusion I would like to draw attention to a few examples of this behaviour, less spectacular perhaps than the help Ananda Guruge gave me but nonetheless significant. When I was expelled from Kalimpong<sup>6</sup> by the Indian authorities and was separated temporarily from my wife and two children who continued to live in Kalimpong, Phun-tshogs pho-brang, learning of my dilemma, immediately sent a superb Khampa to Kalimpong to give my wife all the help she needed. When I was faced with the problem of sending a complete set of the *Rin-chen Gter-mdzod* to Paris from Bodnath, the Cinia Lama sent a monk (who did not speak Hindi or English) with the load of books down to a friend of mine in Calcutta. On another occasion, a high Indian official with authority at Delhi airport put me on an overbooked plane to Patna (and took an Indian off it!), because, as he said: "You are working for the Buddha and I must help you".<sup>7</sup> These remarks will be amplified in my *rnam-thar* which is in preparation.

<sup>5</sup> *Buddhist Studies, Present and Future*. Colombo: Karunaratna and Sons 1997.

<sup>6</sup> During the period in question (1958-1960) Kalimpong was declared by Pandit Nehru to be "a nest of spies". Perhaps I was one of the birds suspected. Whatever may have been the case, my "crimes" were so terrible or so obscure that they never could be formulated orally or in writing in response to my questions. Presumably, my "sin" was to spend my day working with an illiterate, drunken Tibetan story-teller, a refugee from Khams. No one could understand why I did not seek to play bridge with the Indian Politicals and the Tibetan aristos.

<sup>7</sup> My own bibliography is in Samten Karmay and P. Sagant (eds.): *Les Habitants du Toit du Monde. Hommage à Alexander W. Macdonald*. Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie 1996, pp. 27-30.