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GLIMPSSES OF THE LAMA RELIGION IN TIBET AND MONGOLIA



by

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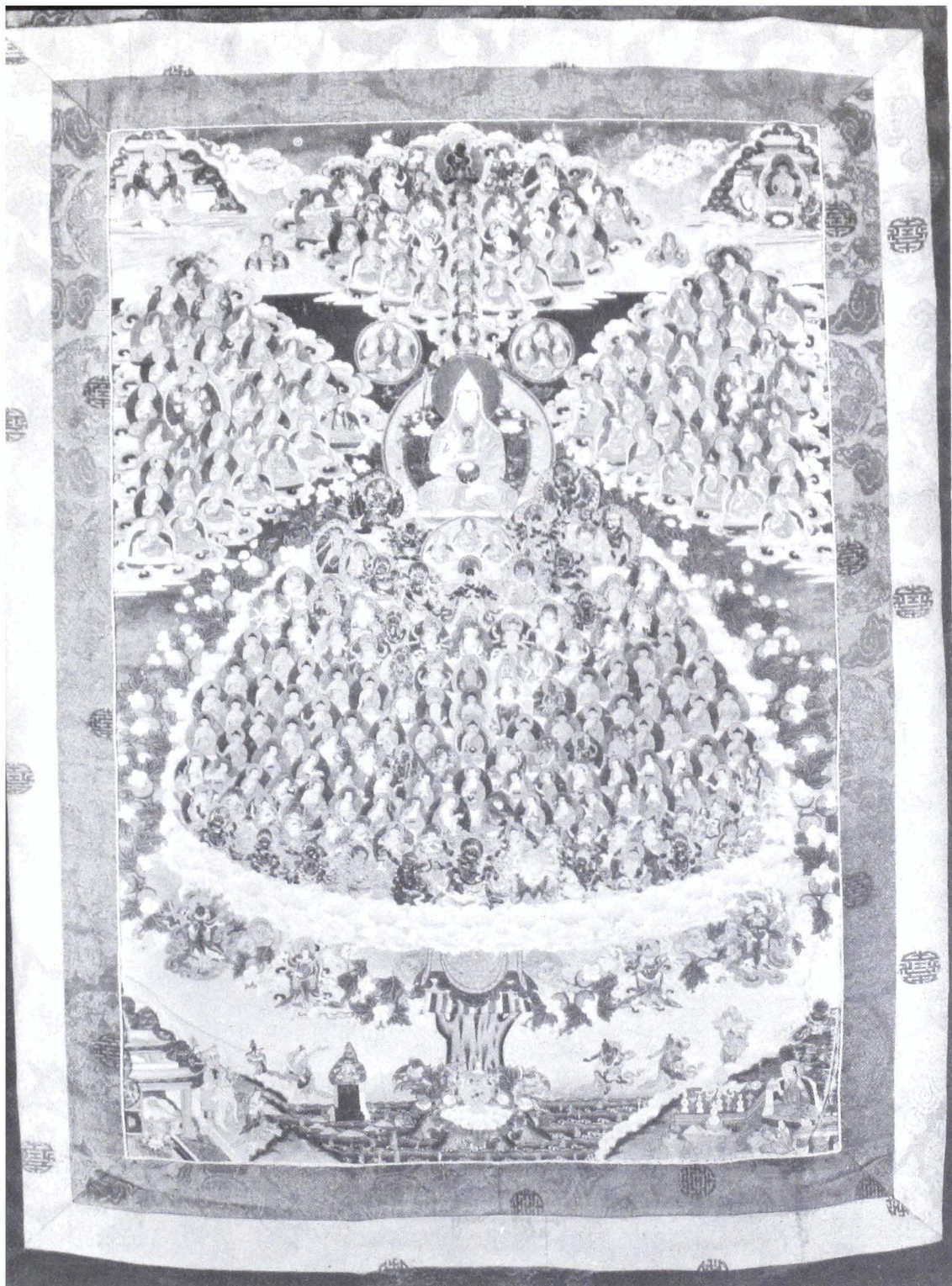


Fig. 1. Tibetan Painting Showing the Chief Deities of Lama Buddhism. (Courtesy of the Newark Museum.)

ACQUIRING MERIT IN LAMA LANDS

On a series of trips through the Tibetan borderlands of West China and Northern India, some years ago, and in Inner Mongolia at the end of the war, I made a special study of the Lama religion. In its popular form this is concerned mostly with the problem of how to gain spiritual merit. In fact, I got the impression that the chief obsession of monks and laymen alike in these lama lands was the struggle for money and merit. It seemed that even the richest and the technically most sanctified never appeared to feel that they had enough of either.

Tibetan Buddhism, or "Lamaism" is the religion of several million people in Tibet and Mongolia, West China, and Northern India. It seems on first sight to be an extraordinarily complicated faith, with its hundreds of deities, all represented by images --of which the University Museum has a notable collection. It has Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and goddesses, not to mention numerous sainted priests and monks, converted demons, and heavenly guardians. (See Fig. 1.)

Only the most highly educated of the lamas could begin to name all these deities correctly, and tell what they stood for. But paradoxically, such men would privately admit that they were not especially important, in themselves; for all of them --except perhaps the saints-- are only symbols of the one Supreme Being, and the form in which he is approached by the worshipper does not much matter. However, for the majority of the lamas, who are not very well educated, and for the laymen, who seldom have any schooling at all, the religion is a much more primitive thing. It is this simpler religion, Tibetan Buddhism in its everyday form, that we will consider here.

The lamas, like other Buddhists, have inherited from earlier Indian religions a belief in the transmigration of souls. The ancient Indians thought that death did not put an end to life. It only altered the form of one's life, without breaking the chain of existence, which would go on from death to rebirth, again and again, in a constant succession of chang-

ing states, until after long ages the present universe would be overthrown. The form of rebirth, they thought, was determined by the results of a person's actions during life, which they called *karma*. Good karma, or accumulated merit, the result of kindness and good deeds, would insure a favorable rebirth, while a person with bad karma as the result of evil would be reborn as an animal, or even as a hell-being.

The historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, introduced a note of hope into this rather fatalistic belief. He taught that by following a plan of life that included meditation and self-denial, it would be possible to break entirely from the endless succession of unhappy lives and attain Nirvana, a condition of eternal bliss. Later Buddhists, and especially the lamas, popularized the religion until, as usually practised, it had very little in common with their master's teachings.

They did this especially by suggesting various simple ways of performing good deeds to offset bad karma, so that when an ordinary person died, his store of merit --like good marks in Heaven-- would make a favorable impression on the gods. Then the latter would grant him a better rebirth, or even help him to break from the endless round of existence and enter one of the paradises which had been substituted for the more abstract Nirvana.

In most Buddhist countries, ordinary people may help their karma by acts of kindness toward men and animals, or by making pilgrimages to sacred places. But the Tibetans, while they enjoy pilgrimages as much as picnics, have developed the whole concept of merit-getting to a very high degree, so it has become a highly organized business.

On visiting the main temple-hall in a lama monastery of any size, one of the first things we always noticed was the large Wheel of Life chart on the porch. This expressed in graphic forms and gaudy colors, so that any layman could understand, the theory of rebirth and the reasons why merit is so desirable. One of the old Buddhist traditions tells that the Buddha himself ordered such a wheel to be set up in the gateway of an Indian temple, and the custom is supposed to have been brought to Tibet with Buddhism in the seventh century. (See Figs. 4 and 5.)

The wheel is shown clutched in the grip of Mara, the Buddhist Satan, a three-eyed bear-like ogre who symbolizes the desire to cling to worldly existence instead of wishing for eternal peace. Around its rim are shown

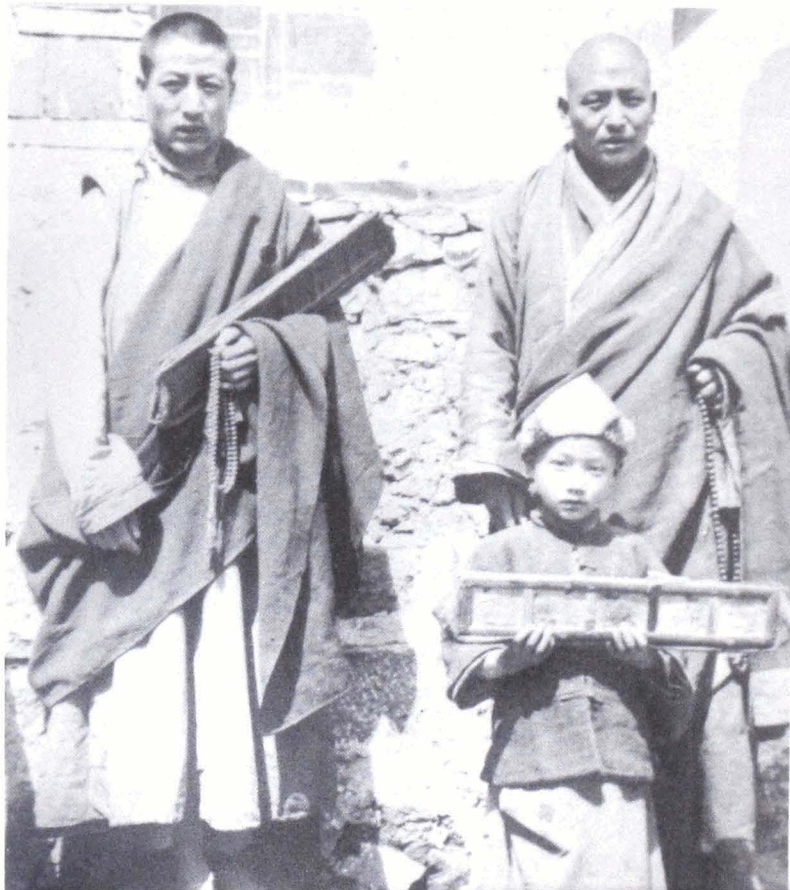


Fig. 2. A lamasery in Little Tibet. (Photo by the writer.)

Fig. 3. Two lamasery officials and a young novice. (Photo by the writer.)

the twelve interrelating causes why unregenerate people remain within the wheel; while on the hub in the center are pictured a wild dove, a serpent, and a pig, each biting the tail of the next to indicate a rotary action. These latter symbolize lust, hatred, and stupidity, the three vices that keep the wheel revolving through Time, and although this choice of creatures may differ rather widely from our own ideas of animal symbolism, they are really not ill-chosen. We Occidentals always think of "the dove of peace," but the male bird puffing out his chest and scraping his tail feathers in the dust before his intended mate is the epitome of passion. Similarly the snake by the side of a path, striking out at a casual passerby is nothing if not malicious; and lastly, the lamas reason, is not the hog's proverbial gluttony due largely to his stupidity in not knowing what is best to eat, or when to stop eating?

The six compartments of the wheel itself show the six worlds of rebirth. The worlds of men, of demi-gods, and of gods, are on the upper half, and are considered as superior places for rebirth; while below are the worlds of animals, or hungry ghosts and of the damned creatures in Hell.

The lamas realize that such a diagram is bound to make a greater impression on the ignorant, and hence have more educational value, if it is as graphic as possible. Thus they usually represent even the superior states as not too desirable, and the lower half luridly grim.

The world of men shows scenes from the daily life of the people in town and temple, while some more modern ones, like one I saw in the State Lamasery at Gantok in Sikkim, include amusing caricatures of Europeans and other Asiatic peoples as well. The world of the demi-gods is a trifle more luxurious, but they are pictured constantly wasting their energies by jealous efforts to invade the land of the gods, being dissatisfied with their own domain. Even in the earthly paradise at the top of the wheel, life is not all that could be desired, as it is frequently necessary for the gods to leave their pleasures and palaces in order to repel the invaders.

By contrast, the world of animals is a place of unrelieved misery. Land and water animals are depicted attacking and eating one another, while domestic animals are often shown submitting to torture and ill-treatment at the hands of men. The fact that Buddhists believe in the possibility of

being reborn as an animal makes it easy to understand why they are strict about being vegetarians. (The Tibetans and Mongols are partial exceptions, as they find that some meat diet is necessary in the cold climate at high altitudes.)

The hungry or tantalized ghosts in the fifth world are the spirits of people who in human life have been miserly, uncharitable, or gluttonous. They have tiny mouths too small to take in enough food, and are constantly craving water to slake their thirst, which is indicated in the pictures by tongues of flame wreathing out from every orifice. The damned live in the last compartment at the bottom of the wheel, where there are sixteen hells, eight hot and eight cold. Both types seem very vivid to the Tibetans and Mongols, who each year must experience in their ordinary life the extremes of temperature. There are punishments to fit every crime. Liars, slanderers and gossips, for example, are pictured with vastly enlarged tongues which are continually being plowed over by active little demons driving teams of oxen; while butchers must undergo especially unpleasant treatment to atone for what they have done to helpless cattle. The more philosophic lamas will sometimes say that these tortures are not to be considered as actual, but are only the morbid creations of the individual's own morbid thoughts, an infernal nightmare in the conscience. However, most lamas and practically all laymen believe that they really exist. Is it any wonder, then, that they are so anxious to gain merit to help them escape all this?

Fortunately, none of these existences, not even the pains of Hell are thought to be permanent; and in this respect Buddhism is less severe than the many forms of Christianity which preach eternal damnation. For Chenrezig, the Lord of Mercy, is ever on hand to rescue lost souls and help them to a favorable rebirth. Frequent prayers to Chenrezig are also considered more effective than any other form of merit-gaining to help people to break from the wheel entirely. For this reason, he is usually pictured outside the wheel with the Buddha, who is shown pointing to mankind the way to salvation which he found for himself. (See Figs. 4 and 7.)

The common, six-syllable prayer to Chenrezig, "*Om mani padme hum,*" is merely a repetition of his title, the Jewel in the Lotus. As such it is really more of a mystic formula or spell, than a prayer in our usual sense of the word. Educated lamas give various reasons to explain its use and



Fig. 4. A wheel of life painting. (Courtesy of the late Quentin Roosevelt.)



Fig. 5. A wheel of life painting showing variations. (Courtesy of the Newark Museum.)

value. One explanation is that the phrase is the essence of all happiness, prosperity, and knowledge, and the great means of deliverance, because each syllable shuts off a world of rebirth. Other lama authorities say that it is repeated in the hope of gaining an entrance to the Western Paradise, presided over by Chenrezig's spiritual father, the Buddha of Boundless Light. For, what father, they ask, can resist the pleas of those who have been continually praising his favored son? In any case, these are all merely rationalizations of a time-honored magic charm that has become associated with Chenrezig.

The commonest way to gain merit, then is by simply reciting the prayer to the Lord of Mercy. Passing the Tibetan pack trains, day or night, we always heard some of the muleteers droning monotonously in their deep bass voices, repeating the sacred phrase as they slipped through their fingers the worn beads of their rosaries. There is an easier method than that, though, a mechanical shortcut that must be familiar to anyone who has read about Tibet. This is the device of a spinning prayer wheel. In its simplest form, this is a cylindrical box of copper, silver, or bone, inside of which is a long roll of coarse paper, printed with a seemingly endless succession of *Om-mani-padme-hums*, revolving around a thin metal shaft set into a wooden handle. A small weight at the end of a cord or chain attached to one side of the container gives the wheel enough momentum after a couple of swings for it to continue spinning by itself for many revolutions. It must spin clockwise to be effective, as the words then theoretically pass before the eyes of the holder, even though they are unseen within the box, and each revolution counts in merit as though one had said or read many hundred prayers. Spun the wrong way, it is not only unlucky but subtracts from previously acquired merit --unless one belongs to the pre-Buddhist *Bon* religion, whose followers like to be different. (See Fig. 6.)

While the prayer wheels of the poorer people are usually severely plain, the better examples have written, in raised Sanskrit letters, around the outer cylinder, the six syllables that are repeated so many times inside. Some of the finest are often stamped or carved with elaborate figures, or even set with bits of coral and turquoise, the favorite stones of the Tibetans.

Travellers whirl these prayer wheels as they stride along the mountain roads, or as they sit precariously atop the bulky loads on their pack-

animals, and elderly people absent-mindedly twirl them as they stroll around to gossip in the evenings. No one can get enough merit. It may seem strange that when foreign travelers or explorers ask the people who are using these wheels --even lamas-- what the prayer inside means, the majority frankly admit they don't know, or else they merely simper with embarrassment and evade answering. The prayer wheel for them is merely a merit machine, and they never stop to question its workings.

For merchants or studious lamas who spend a good deal of their time seated at writing tables, there are stationary prayer wheels, shaped like a miniature Chinese pavilion, with an elaborate base and an upcurved roof. (See Fig. 8.) Through the open sides one can see the prayer cylinder, which in this case is fastened to a slender axle that juts above the lid. A simple twist of the fingers can set this rapidly in motion like a child's top. Since this form takes even less effort and concentration than the type on the handle, it is very popular with elderly people in second childhood.

Since the revolutions of a small wheel can accumulate so much merit, it seems perfectly logical to the lamas to assume that larger ones would produce even more, in proportion to their size. Consequently, many lamaseries have, either on the outer porch of the main temple, or in a special building of its own, an enormous prayer barrel. These are arranged to revolve on a strong vertical axle of metal, with a metal bar as a handle projecting at one side. Some of these contain thousands of prayer pages.

I saw one of these prayer-barrels in a West China lamasery near Likiang, that was eight feet high and four in diameter, yet so delicately balanced that it turned easily with only a slight pressure on the bar-handle. It was very gaudy, painted bright red with the six syllables of the prayer, in old Sanskrit letters, in other colors around the sides, and had a silken canopy hanging over it. As I stood in the small building examining it, a shifty-looking young novice-monk came in, pushed it around once with the minimum of effort, and left with the satisfied expression of a Boy Scout who has done his good deed for the day.

While travelling in Ladakh (Little Tibet), I noticed that both lamaseries and family homes often had prayer wheels ingeniously rigged to labor-saving devices, so they could revolve by themselves and only had to be looked at once in a while to make sure that the axles were not

wearing out too rapidly. In fact the only signs of mass-production methods I saw in the whole culture were these, for speeding up the never-ending process of manufacturing merit.

The most common agencies for merit-storing in its "industrial" phase are wind and water. Atop one Ladakhi farmhouse, among fluttering prayer flags --in themselves purveyors of merit, I saw a row of ingenious little devices, each consisting of a pinwheel made of leather, with cup-shaped vanes, attached to one end of an axle, with a leather-bound prayer-cylinder on the other. Some were spinning madly in a strong wind that roared across the valley from the neighboring peaks, while a couple with damaged vanes revolved half-heartedly, scarcely doing their share in earning merit for the person who had set them up.

In the same district, Hemis monastery has a large prayer barrel set vertically on a heavy wooden shaft provided with paddles below, so as to make the type of water wheel found in Oriental rice mills. The barrel is kept constantly in motion by a small mountain stream that rushes down the slope behind the main temple and has been deflected through a channel into the building. As the water strikes the paddles, the heavy barrel revolves with a great clanking and groaning of timbers, grinding out prayers at a tremendous pace for the whole monastic community.

In the Nepalese lamasery at Darjeeling, in Northern India, I found a still more novel method of saying prayers vicariously. Before the main altar they had a large butter lamp, more than a foot in diameter, which was supposed to burn with an undying flame like a vigil light in a Catholic church. Suspended over this, like a giant lampshade, was a paper cylinder of about the same diameter. This was inscribed with a thousand repetitions of the ever-present *Om-mani-padme-hum*, and as the warm air from the melting butter rose, it passed out through thin slits between pinwheel-like vanes at the enclosed top of the cylinder, causing the whole thing to keep revolving slowly as long as the lamp remained lit.

But, what might be called the simple handicraft method of merit-storing has by no means died out. Daily in the lamaseries, rows of monks sit cross-legged on low benches, reading off pages of the Tibetan Buddhist scriptures in deep bass voices. This is also to gain merit for the entire community. However, as their principal holy book, the *Kangyur*, is usually printed in one hundred and eight bulky volumes, and its scarcely less

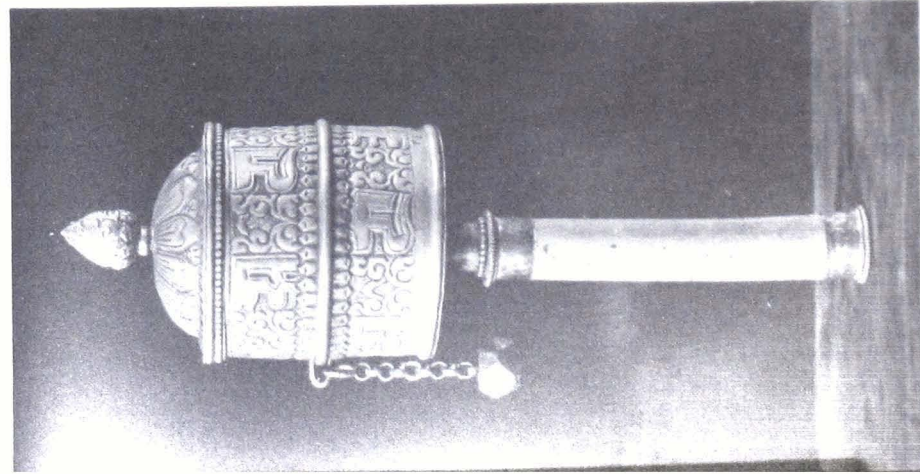


Fig. 6. A hand prayer-wheel. (Photo by Reuben Goldberg.)

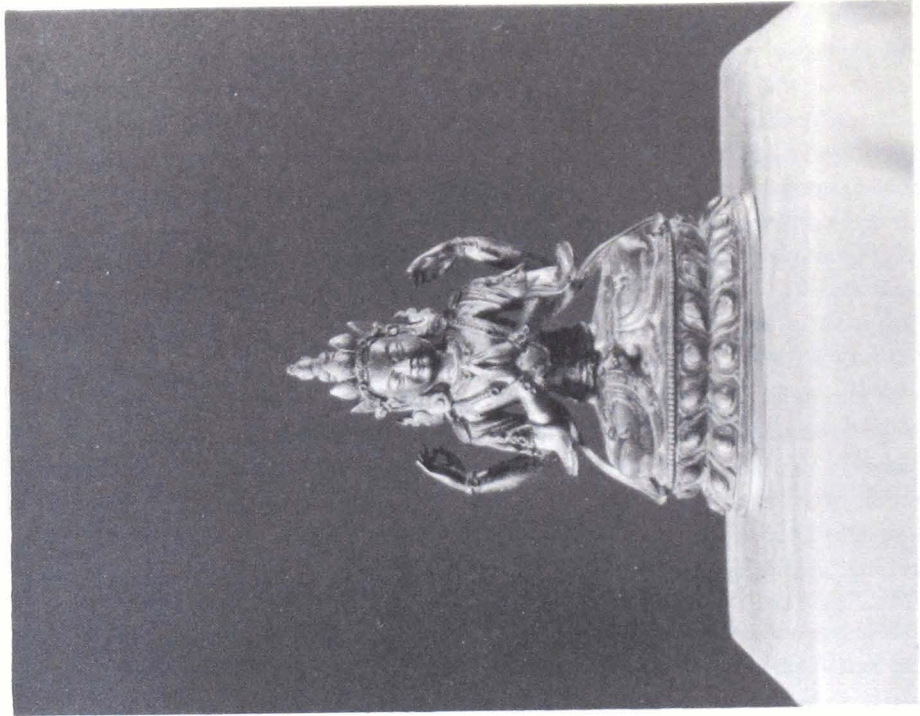


Fig. 7. An image of Chenrezig. (Photo by Reuben Goldberg.)

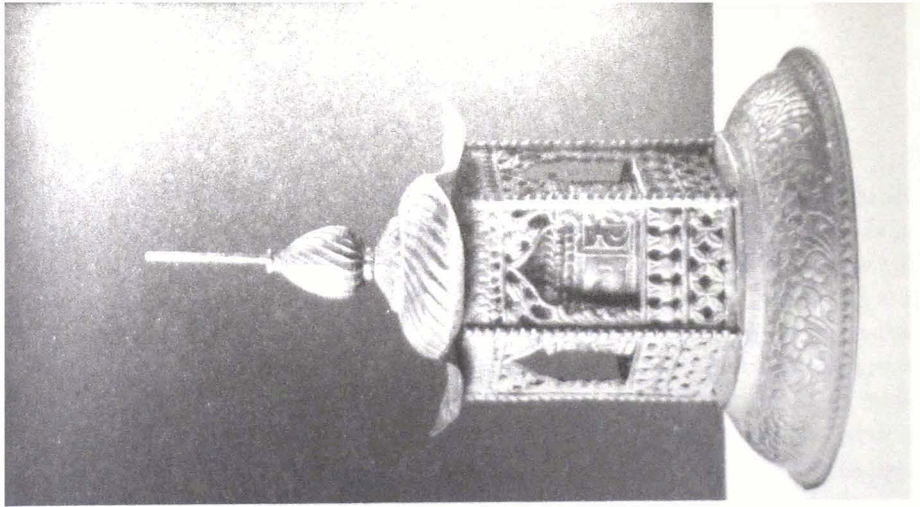


Fig. 8. A table prayer-wheel. (Photo by Reuben Goldberg.)

sacred commentary, the *Tangyur*, is in two hundred and five more, it would take years for one monk to read either "book" all the way through. Thus there must be a division of labor. Each moderately literate man in the monastic community takes a sheaf of pages --they are not bound together, but merely stacked between board covers-- and reads his own set. The droning din is frightful, as all read their separate pages aloud at the same time; but in this way a lamasery of the larger type, which may have several hundred monks in residence, can get through both books in a comparatively short time.

Except for the highest lamas, who have undergone a rigorous training from the time their parents presented them to the Church in boyhood, few monks know or care about the meaning of the words they read. They merely pronounce the sounds as recorded in the thirty-odd syllables of the Tibetan alphabet. As intellect plays no part in most of the reading, it is not surprising to find that some of the larger prayer barrels mentioned above, including a number I have seen in Mongolia, contain many volumes of the scriptures, which are cheerfully assumed as having been "read" with each revolution of the barrel. A famous one in the lamasery at Labrang in Northwest China, fills a building two stories high and contains complete sets of both the *Kangyur* and the *Tangyur*, making scripture-reading an easy job even for the illiterate.

In the monasteries, the making of paintings and images, or the copying of holy books, are all considered as specialized ways of gaining merit. Some of the simpler images are merely stamped out of clay with brass molds. But the metal ones, which often display considerable artistic refinement (as shown in Fig. 7.) are not made by amateurs. After serving a long apprenticeship under a master sculptor, a monk may devote his entire life to this.

When a new lamasery is being decorated, or the frescoes renewed in an old one, the master painter sketches the details on the wall in charcoal, often using a previously prepared cartoon. Meanwhile his apprentices grind and mix paints, fill in the simpler outlines, and later do the backgrounds. Throughout the painting process, a chorus of monks chant the passage of the holy book that refers to the subject of the painting, so the artist will be sure to keep in the proper religious mood, and at the same time avoid omitting any details mentioned in the original text. In this way they also take their part in this particular act of merit.

There are a number of ways in which the laymen, too, can gain merit in big doses. In all Buddhist countries, as in Christian ones, the well-to-do can gain merit in Heaven and prestige with their fellow men by donating money or goods to the Church, either for charity or to be used toward building holy structures. In Tibet, the latter are temples, monasteries, or stupas. A stupa is a bottle-shaped tower built to contain the ashes or other relics of holy monks, prominent princes of the Church, or saints. The first of these repositories were traditionally made in Northern India to preserve the relics of the historical Buddha, and became important centers of pilgrimage. When this institution was brought to Tibet, where the stupas are called *chorten*, the architecture was slightly altered to make a distinctive Tibetan style that is now found all over Tibet and in the more settled districts of Mongolia. (See Figs. 9 and 11.)

In ancient India they also had a rite for acquiring merit called *pradakshina*. This consisted of merely walking around a temple, shrine, or stupa, "in the direction of the sun" --we would say clockwise. (This, you will remember was the direction in which the prayer wheels have to turn in order to be effective). The custom was carried to Tibet with the introduction of Buddhism, and in time, the Tibetans came to believe that by merely passing a stupa on the left, merit could be acquired with much less trouble.

Accordingly, chortens and "mani-piles" (little heaps of stone slabs each carved with *Om-mani-pa-me-hum* by seekers after merit) were placed in the middle of all roads leading to lamaseries or important towns, so that travellers would inevitably pass them, and in passing acquire grace. Passing on the wrong side is considered, like spinning a prayer wheel backwards, as a dangerous thing liable to undo a great deal of hard-earned merit. But there is small chance of this. Even the pack animals are trained to pass sacred monuments on the left, and if a man should ever absent-mindedly forget, his mount would automatically take him the proper way.

The *mani*-stone custom is carried to extremes near large centers of trade and pilgrimage, such as Leh, in Little Tibet. On entering that city from the southeast, I had to skirt one *mani*-wall over three-quarters of a mile long, with a huge chorten at each end. The top of the wall was covered with thousands of slate slabs, each carved to show the familiar prayer, or a sacred symbol, in bold relief. The mere production of these must



Fig. 9. A Tibetan stupa built over a gate. (Photo by the writer.)

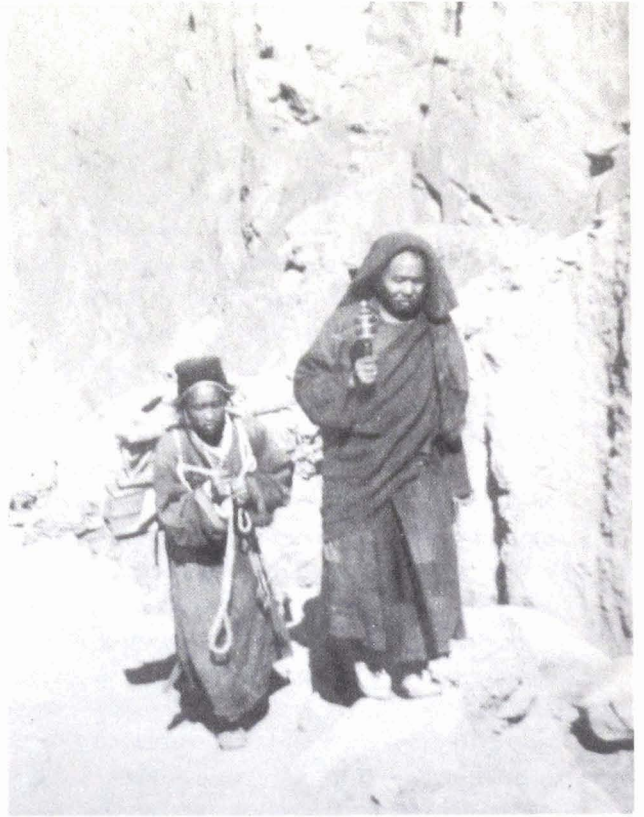


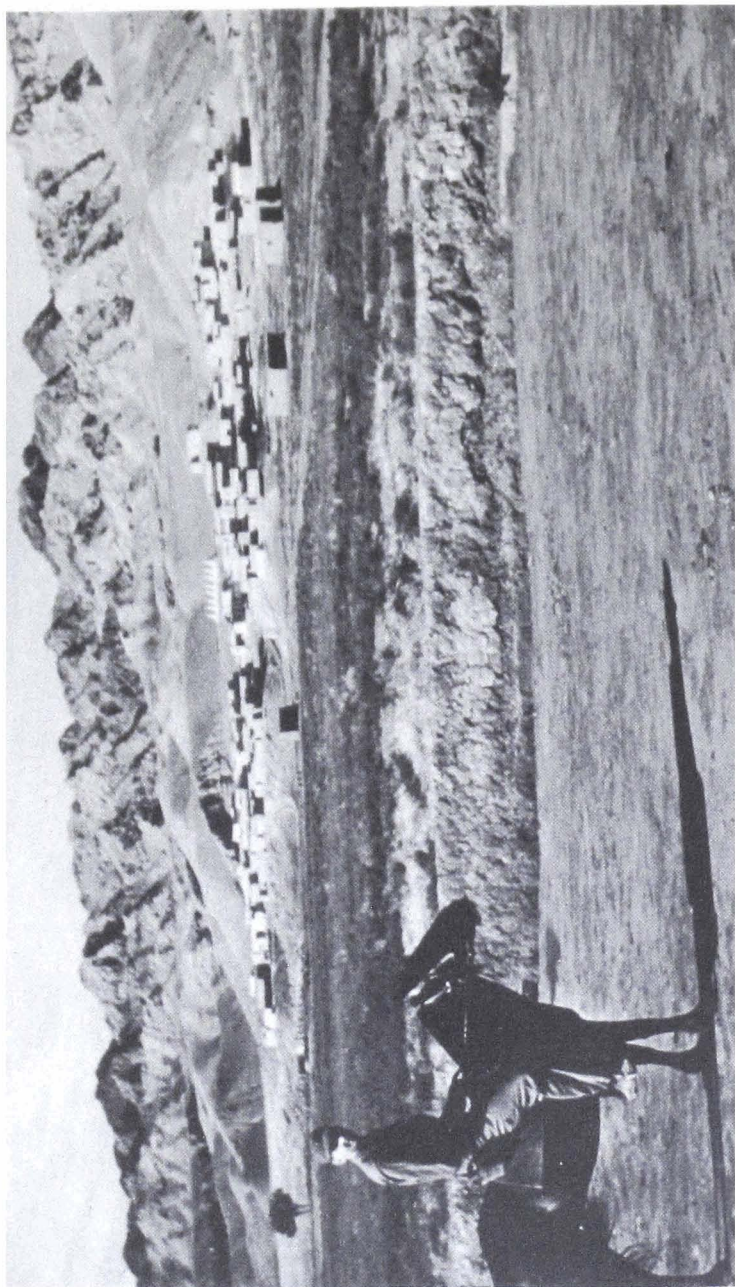
Fig. 10. (above) Traveling lama swinging prayer-wheel, while disciple carries books.

Fig. 11. (below) Chortens on the way to Leh. (Photos by the writer.)



have taken many years of many peoples' time, but the net result was worth it by Tibetan standards, as the amount of merit to be gained by merely passing it would be beyond human calculation.

By far the most efficient method of merit-storing that I ever found, though, was in a lamasery near Likiang, on the Chinese-Tibetan border. Here several of the most approved methods could be practised at one and the same time. The main temple was surrounded by an enclosed passage-way, in which a hundred leather-bound prayer cylinders were set into the inner wall, each containing a volume of the *Kangyur* (one version of which has only one hundred volumes). As the monks walked around the passage repeating their prayers, they would automatically be performing the rite of *pradakshina* in encircling the holy building. At the same time their shoulders, grazing the leather cylinders, would set them in motion and keep them revolving, thereby "reading" the scriptures. There was barely room to swing a hand prayer wheel, but some monks found this possible, too. In short, with all the merit thus accumulated, the whole community must have felt quite assured of being able to break the chain of rebirths, to free themselves from the Wheel of Existence.



A PRINCE OF THE LAMA CHURCH

Our brief glimpse at the more popular aspects of Tibetan Buddhism may have made it seem a very simple faith. The real complexity of the religion begins to appear when we look into the organization of the Church, with its countless dignitaries and officials. This forms a pyramid, at the top of which are the Lord Abbots, Grand Lamas, and Living Buddhas. Toward the end of the recent war I was sent to Shanpa, the war-time capital of Suiyuan Province in Inner Mongolia, where I found the opportunity to revive a long-standing interest in the Mongols and their form of Tibetan Buddhism, and to meet personally one of the great figures of this Lama hierarchy.

We had not been in Shanpa very long before I heard of Shandagu Temple, the home of a "Living Buddha," who was the reincarnation of a great Lama saint and the spiritual ruler of all the local Mongols. The Chinese general who told me about it explained that it was not far away, at the base of the mountains that separated the Shanpa plain from the Gobi Desert. Soon after, the Japanese unexpectedly surrendered and my special job ended. I immediately planned a trip to Shandagu lamasery, arranging to take an American chaplain who had come to Shanpa on a tour of American outposts, and who shared my interest in comparative religions.

We set out on horseback after lunch the following Sunday, and rode for several hours across country, toward the mountains. It had been raining heavily for several days, a rare thing in that semi-desert, and the irrigation ditches dug by immigrant Chinese farmers, who had recently moved in from south of the Great Wall, were flooding over into the surrounding fields. It was hard going for our little Mongol ponies, and we ourselves got badly soaked in fording the swollen creeks. To make matters worse, the change of wind that had cleared the weather came toward us out of the northwest, from Outer Mongolia, bringing icy gusts that might have come direct from Siberia.

We broke our journey at Manhui, a small village built up around a Belgian mission. Here we met an old missionary from Brussels who had

made quite a study of Lamaism, the rival faith. He was much interested to hear that we were bound for Shandagu to see the Living Buddha, and at my companion's request, he explained just what a "Living Buddha" was.

When the Mongols were converted to Lamaism by the Tibetans about three centuries ago, he told us, they wanted some holy men to correspond to the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, and the other great reincarnations of Tibet. Accordingly, their Tibetan teachers proclaimed that the souls of several Tibetan saints, long since dead, had found new homes in the bodies of various Mongolian monks. These men were given special honors, and whole monastery communities grew up around them. Their followers told everyone that they had powers of foreknowledge and gifts of healing, and their reputations struck the common people with such awe that they spoke of them as "Living Buddhas."

Whenever one of these reincarnations died, the lamas of his temple began looking for children who had been born at the time of his death. If they found one who had unusual birthmarkings or who was able to recognize some of the dead man's possessions as "his own," he was immediately hailed as being the new bodily home for the saint's soul, and was brought back in pomp to fill the throne of the Living Buddha. While still so young, the boy would naturally be in the care of a regent and tutor, but he would still be treated as a living god.

Our host told us that the present Living Buddha of Shandagu was still in this minority stage, having only been "discovered" some ten years ago. Then, it was a tremendous honor to be the Lord of Shandagu, he said, but now the monastery had fallen on evil days.

The chaplain asked what had happened to it.

"You will see," replied our host in a solemn voice. Then he changed the subject to the confused state of Chinese border politics, and the plight of the Mongols being squeezed out of their grasslands by the incoming Chinese immigrants.

Later in the evening, he sent for a Chinese-Mongolian neighbor, named Ho, who had formerly been a trader with the people of Outer Mongolia, and had been an intimate friend of the previous incarnation of the Living Buddha of Shandagu. After a brief conversation, he agreed to come along with us as Mongol-interpreter and guide.

We set out again next morning at dawn, riding first through a marginal farming area recently reclaimed by Chinese settlers, then across wasteland returned to grazing after greedy farming methods had exhausted the soil for all but coarse grass.

After two hours of rough riding, we came to a small but deep river, the Wu-chia Ho, and on crossing this by a primitive ferryboat, we entered the true desert. Low dunes dotted with clumps of sagebrush gave way to stretches of bare gravel and soft sand, until the vegetation vanished altogether, leaving only sand. Hot winds as from a blast furnace rose from the sun-baked ground, making a sharp contrast to the cold of yesterday. We felt oppressed by the heat and the sense of desolation.

Then suddenly we caught sight of a cluster of great white buildings looming in the distance against the dark, reddish mountains. They shimmered in the haze above the hot sand, and seemed to be changing in shape. The nearer we got, the larger they became, though their outlines still wavered through the hot air. Sometimes for a moment we could almost see them clearly, then another heat wave moving across the desert would blur their lines. It seemed like the mirage of an enchanted city, certainly a fitting home for a great saint and prince of the Church.

We rode up a gradual slope of sand and gravel to the main buildings, which stood on a terrace at the base of the cliffs, and were met at the gate by the host-monk. A stout, jovial Mongol in scarlet robes, he welcomed us --through Ho--, then led us into the guest-courtyard, and helped to tether our horses, before ushering us into a small, square building of purely Tibetan architecture at the rear. (Obviously the Mongols had borrowed their formal architecture, as well as their religion, from Tibet.)

Here, the host-monk announced, we were to be received in audience by the present Living Buddha of Shandagu, Tobdung Wanchuk, the Hambu Gegen, tenth reincarnation of the Tibetan poet-saint Milaraspa.

While pondering these high-sounding titles, relayed to us by Mr. Ho, we seated ourselves cross-legged on silken rugs on a side dais below the empty throne. Before each of us a lama attendant placed a small individual table of carved and gilded wood. Others brought us large wooden boxes of parched millet, and some clarified butter in silver-rimmed porcelain cups. All these things we were supposed to mix with our tea, which they served us in silver-lined bowls of some richly-grained

dark wood. When we had each mixed a brew to our taste, we sat back and looked around us, admiring the magnificent furnishings of the room.

The throne itself was richly carved and gilded and had the three cushions of yellow silk appropriate to Mongol royalty. Above it hung a temple banner mounted in heavy brocade, depicting Tson Kapa, the founder of the Yellow sect (to which this temple belonged), surrounded by the nine former reincarnations that had preceded the present Living Buddha. These were so idealized that it was impossible to guess what manner of men they had been. The artist had concentrated on the golden yellow hats and capes which indicated their exalted position, and had made no attempt at actual portraiture.

On each side of central banner hung six more Tibetan-style paintings, showing Milaraspa, the "first existence" of the Shandagu incarnations back in the 11th century. Each one had a central portrait of the poet-saint in a nonchalant pose, inviting inspiration, set against a mosaic of brightly-colored scenes illustrating his life and writings. Through all these paintings the spirits of the Living Buddha's predecessors dominated the room, impressing us with the long tradition.

On a ledge below the paintings the monks had displayed various gifts presented by previous visitors to the spiritual lords of Shandagu. Among them we saw foreign clocks, rare vases full of fading artificial flowers (the Mongols seldom saw real ones), a jade-studded scepter in a glass case, and some teacups and bowls of delicate china.

At sight of all these, we hesitated to present our own meager gifts, a roll of silk, a small porcelain figure of the Buddha of Wisdom, and some hard candies wrapped in cellophane --included at the last minute when Father Schramm told us the Living Buddha was still just a boy. Knowing the mercenary reputation of the lamas, I wondered if the former offerings had been deliberately set out to shame guests into giving more.

Our random gazing was suddenly interrupted by a flurry of maroon and crimson robes as a new group of inquisitive monks gathered around us, firing questions at us through Ho. Some of these late comers could speak a little Chinese, and when they found I could too, they spoke to me directly. Everyone seemed to be talking at once. It sounded like a flock of magpies. Many of them could never have seen a foreigner, they were so curious about us. Our cameras puzzled them, and our strange clothes interested them, but our features amused them very much.



Fig. 13. One of the lama temples, surrounded by monks' residences. (Photo by W. E. Hill.)

Suddenly the chattering stopped, and the monks stepped reverently aside as Tobdung Wanchuk, the Living Buddha, entered with his guardian, carrying a black and white pekinese under his arm. He was a short, slender, rather vapid-looking boy of twelve, bareheaded, but wearing a splendid vest of scarlet and gold brocade, with outer robes and skirt of crimson serge, and a pair of handsomely-worked tartar boots with upturned toes. His dress rather than his manner identified him as a prince of the Church. We were not particularly impressed. Privately we concluded that he looked very ineffective, and was probably merely a tool in the hand of his sharp-looking regent.

When he had seated himself informally on a cushion below the throne, with his little dog beside him, we presented our gifts, and asked Ho to express our pleasure at meeting him. He just stared at us with an empty expression and made no reply.

While his guardian and the other monks politely praised the buddha figure, which to them was particularly valuable because of the rarity of porcelain in Mongolia, the boy picked up some of the candies, and with a half smile on his dull face, held them up to the light to examine their bright colors. The crackle of the cellophane wrappings seemed to delight him especially. We felt sorry for him. Even if he were more intelligent than he looked, he was little more than a child, and we hated to think of him doomed to spend a life of ceremonial and ritual appearances, without any opportunity for games or normal companionship with children of his own age.

When the audience --such as it was-- was completed, the Living Buddha came down from his dais and was escorted out by several attendants to prepare for services in the main temple. We followed more leisurely, with some of the Chinese-speaking monks, while Ho, having fulfilled his purpose, went to visit a friend in another building.

The main temple was a two-story, block-like structure, also in Tibetan style. It was severely plain externally, except for a dark red strip, set with round ornaments in real gold, around the top of the whitewashed wall. It stood on a terrace faced in stone, with stone steps leading up to the recessed porch. On either side of the great doorway huge frescoes of the Four Kings of Heaven were brilliantly painted in red and yellow, blue and green, with details in gold, making a transition to the color-rich interior.



Fig. 14. (top). Scene in a monastery courtyard: two lamas bring water to the temple.

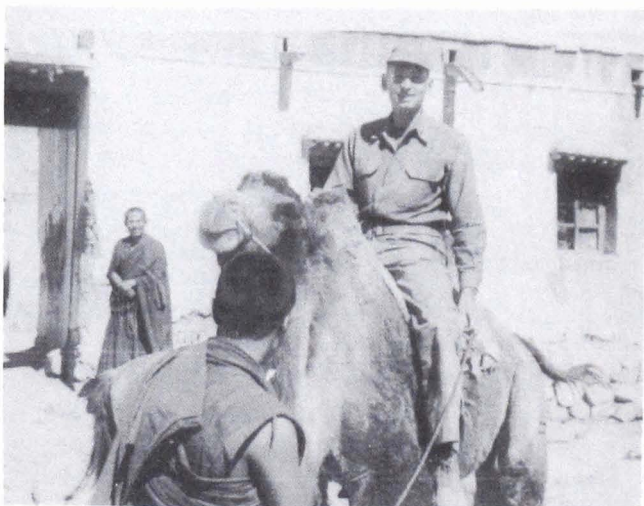


Fig. 15. (center). The writer borrows a camel for a ride in the Gobi.

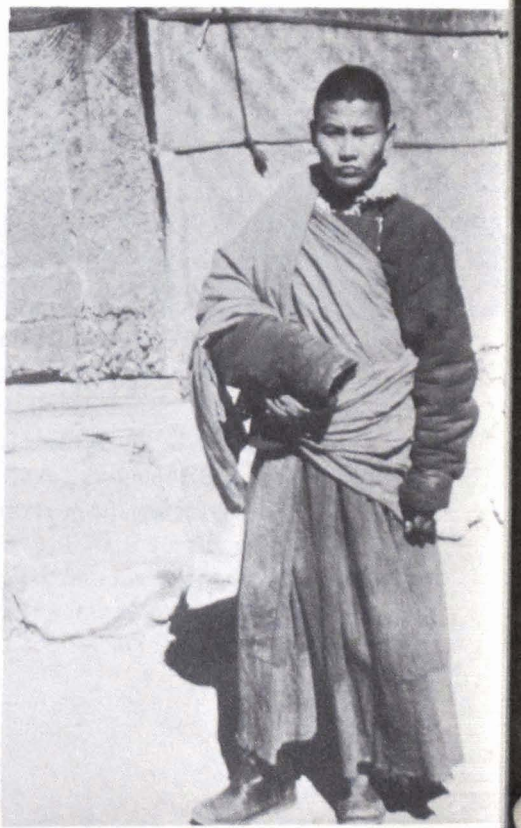


Fig. 16. (right). Uruk, the host-lama, a young Mongol nobleman, standing in front of the entrance to a yurt. (Photos by W. E. Hill.)

We entered the building to find a large main hall lined with columns of bright red lacquer. The four central ones, larger than the rest, rose to the four corners of a well in the roof, which admitted light to the windowless interior. From the ceiling between two of these, hung the temple's name-board. Painted in gold, on blue, this showed its title, "Monastery of the Completed Reincarnation" (referring to its Living Buddhas), written in three languages -- Mongolian, Chinese and Tibetan. We thought the last of these, "Gundul Ling," the richest sounding. Pronounced in deep bass by the Living Buddha's aged tutor, it sounded like the rumble of distant thunder.

As we strolled around examining the fine brocade-mounted paintings on the walls, the Living Buddha entered with his attendants. He walked rather proudly under an enormously tall, broad hat of yellow silk, like those worn by his predecessors in the painting in the throne-room, and for the first time he had an almost regal look. Ascending another gilded throne, at the far end of the hall, where one would normally expect to see an altar, he seated himself cross-legged on the yellow cushions and nonchalantly picked up his bell and ritual scepter (*dorje*), to preside over the service in the dual role of officiant and chief deity.

Meanwhile the other lamas filed in, taking their seats on the long prayer benches that extended the length of the hall, facing each other across the center aisle. Each had his tea-bowl, which was constantly refilled by boy attendants who walked up and down the aisle carrying huge jugs, as well as a sheaf of pages from their holy scriptures, in Tibetan. (One of the monks confided to me that they could only read this foreign script phonetically and could not understand it, but they still got merit by reading it.)

The older monks chanted while the younger ones kept up a weird, but --at first-- not unpleasing din, with several types of musical instruments. Some brayed on conch shells, or on small trumpets of brass, shaped like dragons; or burst their lungs over much larger, telescopic ones of copper trimmed in silver, which extended fully twelve feet in length. Others blew whining flageolets, or piped on shrill wooden whistles; while an undercurrent clashing of cymbals and booming of heavy drums maintained the rhythm, accented by sharper sounds from the skull rattles and hand-bells. As a masterpiece of ingenuity, one young lama had rigged up



Fig. 17. A great prayer-wheel in the porch of a lama temple. (Photo by W. E. Hill.)

seven of these hand-bells on a wooden frame suspended from the rafters, so that he could ring them all simultaneously, giving a sharp clash with every pull on the long cord. Altogether the noise was deafening. We wondered how the boy-god's ears could stand it.

Before the din drove us out, we went on into the sanctuary through a door behind the Living Buddha's throne. Here we found a huge altar with a large gilded Buddha attended by disciples, and a slightly smaller figure of Tson Kapa with a pair of lama attendants. Behind these two sets of images stood lesser ones, placed in niches of artificial rock which formed a sort of reredos. The rich gilding on the figures of the saints and goddesses gleamed impressively from the blue-painted grottoes; while dark figures of the demon-gods, at the sides, blended with the background so we saw scarcely more than their crowns of skulls and blood-dripping tongues. The chaplain, who had never seen a lama temple, was amazed at the way the sublime and the horrible were so grotesquely blended.

Returning to the front of the building, we climbed a steep flight of rickety stairs to the second story. This consisted of a series of small, shed-like meditation rooms opening out on a central court. In the middle stood a small square structure resembling a pagoda, placed over the well in the ceiling of the prayer hall; its handsome lattice windows now swung open to let in the light below.

We glanced down on the service, which from here was slightly easier on our eardrums. The little Living Buddha still dominated the scene in his brilliant robes, which stood out among the shadows at the end of the hall, but he looked rather pathetic, smaller than ever under his great ceremonial hat. He was idly leafing through the book set before him, with a dazed and unhappy look. At the moment he was taking no real part except as an object of veneration.

Resuming our explorations, we examined a tall structure at the back, composed of a lower section faced with lattice windows to admit light to the sanctuary, and an upper chapel for the Living Buddha. Our guide called this a "holy of holies" and refused to open it for us. Opposite this at the front of the building, was another sanctuary, which we entered through a low, carved doorway. It was rather dark inside, but in the heavy shrine-cabinet over its altar, we dimly glimpsed a large image of the temple's guardian, Yamantaka, "the Conqueror of Death." This demoniac

figure with his great bull's head and thirty-six arms, silhouetted against an aura of flames, was clasping his screaming consort to him in an embrace of rage and ecstasy. The chaplain shuddered.

From here we returned to quieter aspects of Lamaism in the smaller halls on the hillside above the main temple. These were dedicated to calm, resigned-looking Buddhas, and lush, full-breasted goddesses. Handsome Tibetan-style temple banners, set in rich borders of Chinese silks and brocades, lined their walls, but I was struck by the absence of the small bronze images which are usually so numerous in lama shrines.

I remarked about this lack, and one of the Chinese-speaking Mongols who was acting as opener of temples --they are kept locked in this bandit-ridden region when not in use-- pointed down to the plain below the monastery, where an abandoned campsite of a hundred or more quonset-hut-shaped adobe shacks straddled the road.

"Chinese soldiers," he said simply. Then he went on to explain in a resigned but faintly bitter voice how the border troops quartered there recently had looted almost everything that could be carried, from most of the temples. He showed us how even their officers, living in some of the outer buildings of the monastery, shrine halls as well as dormitories, had defaced the clean white compound walls with fine-sounding Nationalist slogans, and reduced the buildings themselves to empty shells.

Now we knew what the Belgian priest had meant when he said that Shandagu had greatly changed.

Quartering troops in temples has been an accepted practice in modern China, where religion is taken lightly and temples are considered as public property, but I had noticed that the inevitable destruction is always much worse in the Mongol and Tibetan temples of the frontier regions. The border Chinese, despising the alien peoples they have so largely dispossessed, seem to take pleasure in wanton breakage and looting. The very fact that these shrines are revered to an extent incomprehensible to them, and still play an important part in the life of these other folk, appears to inspire them to greater excesses, and the presence of protesting but defenceless monks and priests only arouses their latent sadism.

Later the Second Grand Lama, acting temporal head of the lamasery in the absence of the abbot, was bitter but resigned when we passed a gutted temple building as he led us up to visit his private quarters.

"Chinese soldiers!" he muttered, with a shrug of his shoulders. This time the words had a deeper emphasis. He explained to us, however, that in spite of these depredations by the Chinese soldiers, and in spite of a Japanese attempt to win them over by presenting a fine German police dog to the Living Buddha at the time they raided Shanpa, the monks of Shandagu had remained loyal to the Governor of Suiyuan and the Central Government of Chiang Kai-shek, throughout the war. They felt that the only hope for the Mongol people was to stay on good terms with the Chinese, though that often meant humiliation. They had no real choice.

The hospitable monks tried to persuade us to stay a day or two, but the chaplain had to get back to camp, having already received orders to go elsewhere. We left rather reluctantly, and by hard riding got back to camp at sunset.

When I returned to Shandagu a month later, while on another trip with two friends from camp, the monks told us that the Living Buddha was away. We heard that he was spending a few days at his mother's camp in a nearby valley, and decided to make a special trip to see him. The tent of a Living Buddha, we thought, must be something of a spectacle. It was already late in the evening, so we spent the night in the monastery, and next morning at breakfast we were lucky enough to find a young Mongol of the Living Buddha's tribe (the Dalat Banner), who offered to take us out to see him.

Riding back along the range for about a mile, we came to a deep, narrow gorge, and turned up it. Around the second turn, we found a small strip of raised ground with three small and rather dirty Mongol tents of coarse felt, with a flock of goats grazing on the slope above them. It looked like any other Mongol camp, but our guide insisted it was the Living Buddha's. We were disappointed, to say the least.

We dismounted, tethered our horses to a forked stick, and entered the center tent, while some children sat on the fierce dogs. At the back sat the Living Buddha's old tutor, with a sheaf of scripture pages on his lap, while his exalted pupil sat below him, listening to some long-winded theological explanation. Both looked up curiously as we entered, and the old man setting down his book, half rose to offer me the seat of honor beside him, while a small attendant scurried out for some tea and cheese.

I bowed to each, presenting them with the usual blue silk scarf, or *khatag*, the Mongolian equivalent of a visiting card, and gave a small



Fig. 18. The great golden image at Shandagu. (Photo by W. S. La Sor.)

package of gifts to the Living Buddha.

I was agreeably surprised to find that our first impression of the latter had been mistaken. The little Living Buddha proved quick and intelligent, taking particular interest in the possibilities of a magnet we had given him among our presents. In his plain gray robe with a twisted purple sash for a belt, and well-worn boots, he looked like any ordinary Mongol youth from a family of moderate means.

He spoke freely to me in rather good Chinese, though he had not even admitted knowing that language on my previous visit. He was always very respectful to his tutor, and to us as his guests, when I was speaking to him directly; but when we three Americans talked together, or took time out to drink tea, he laughed and joked at our expense with his little brothers, who ran in and out of the tent, shyly giggling.

It was amusing to see his expression when he smiled. His very natural grin seemed to accentuate the sharp angle of his chin, and this with his pointed ears made him look like an elf, or imp of mischief. I concluded that his apparent dullness on the previous occasion had been largely due to shyness; perhaps he felt ridiculous at dressing with such pomp to preside over a half-looted monastery, or else he was just bored at being made to dress up formally to receive a couple of stupid foreigners. At any rate, he was very human.

As we rode away again, after receiving *khatag* scarfs and farewell presents of cheese, we decided that this interlude away from the temple must have been like a summer vacation for the boy-god, even if he had to spend part of it at his books. We hoped for his sake that he could enjoy it as long as possible, before returning to the soul-crushing pomp of Shandagu Temple.



Fig. 19. Hand prayer-wheel in action. (Photo by Reuben Goldberg.)

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