

# THE MIDDLE WAY

Journal of the Buddhist Society



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FULL COLOUR CENTRE SPREAD: ART TREASURES OF TSAPARANG AND THÖLING  
photographs by Brian Beresford and Sean Jones

LETTERS \* BOOK REVIEWS \* NEWSROUND

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## THE MIDDLE WAY

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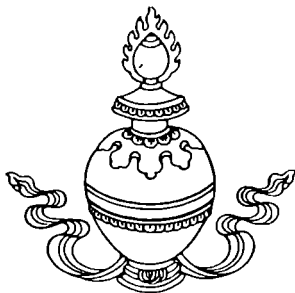
## Editorial

When we undertake any sort of Buddhist practice, we may initially imagine that it's going to be a blissful encounter with the beautiful and the 'spiritual'. What we tend to be confronted with instead is the dark side of ourselves. Old hatreds and resentments, greed, anger, obsessive concern for self, indulgent fantasies, ruthless ambition, jealousies — the inventory of evils seems measureless. Our habitual tendency is to try to draw a veil over it all and, dwelling selectively on our real or imagined virtues and talents, to go through life feeling that we're not so bad — pretty good really . . .

Many human modes of behaviour and many aspects of modern life — much if not all of the entertainment industry, for a start — are about avoiding encountering the truth about ourselves. So it tends to be rather a shock when the spotlight of awareness is turned inwards and reveals, not beatitude but the proverbial can of worms! Understandably many who start Buddhist practice actually complain that it makes them *worse*. In fact they were that bad all along only they never noticed!

If we think about it, this is precisely what must have happened to the Buddha. He propounded the teaching of the Three Fires precisely because he had discovered greed, hatred and delusion in himself. And he taught Sila and the other aspects of the Path precisely because he had found them to be the most effective ways of dealing with the unregenerate aspects of his own nature. He too must at first have felt he was a hopeless case just as we tend to now.

So we needn't feel so bad when we discover the dark side of ourselves. In fact, we're in very good company! This of course doesn't mean that we can let rip — express our hatred, indulge all our desires and so forth. These have to be restrained and transformed through training. But no positive advance can be made if they are not recognized and accepted in the first place — and awareness and acceptance are highly transformative in themselves.



## HEALTH AND SPIRITUALITY – THE TIBETAN PERSPECTIVE

A photograph of a thangka or a painting in colour is necessary in order to familiarize the mind. On the other hand, the Medicine Buddha must not be visualized as a solid form in objective outline. He should appear as insubstantial, transparent and mirror-like, like the reflection of the moon in water. One's accompanying feelings should be of wisdom, love and power combined, and one should meditate with a deep devotion and intensity of feeling.

*Men-la* as visualized in front of us has all the characteristics of a Buddha. He has the power and intention to benefit all beings. He expresses His compassion through His profound healing ability.

He can be visualized above the head of the sick person or above one's own head, as the case may be. When walking, visualize Him on your right as in circumambulation. Before going to sleep, visualize Him on your pillow. When eating, visualize *amrita*<sup>6</sup> flowing from *Men-la* into the food.

If you are treating a patient manually, visualize *Men-la* in front of you and *amrita* flowing from your hands into the patient. On the palm of your hands visualize Him and also a *Men-la* on each finger-tip. In treating a patient medicinally, visualize *amrita* flowing into the medicines and giving them the qualities of the panacea.

Visualize *amrita* flowing into oneself from the Medicine Buddha giving or increasing one's capacity to heal.

Finally, reading and studying the Medicine Buddha Sutra and, if initiated, regularly reciting the Mantra, will bring great spiritual benefit to oneself and others.

### FOOTNOTES

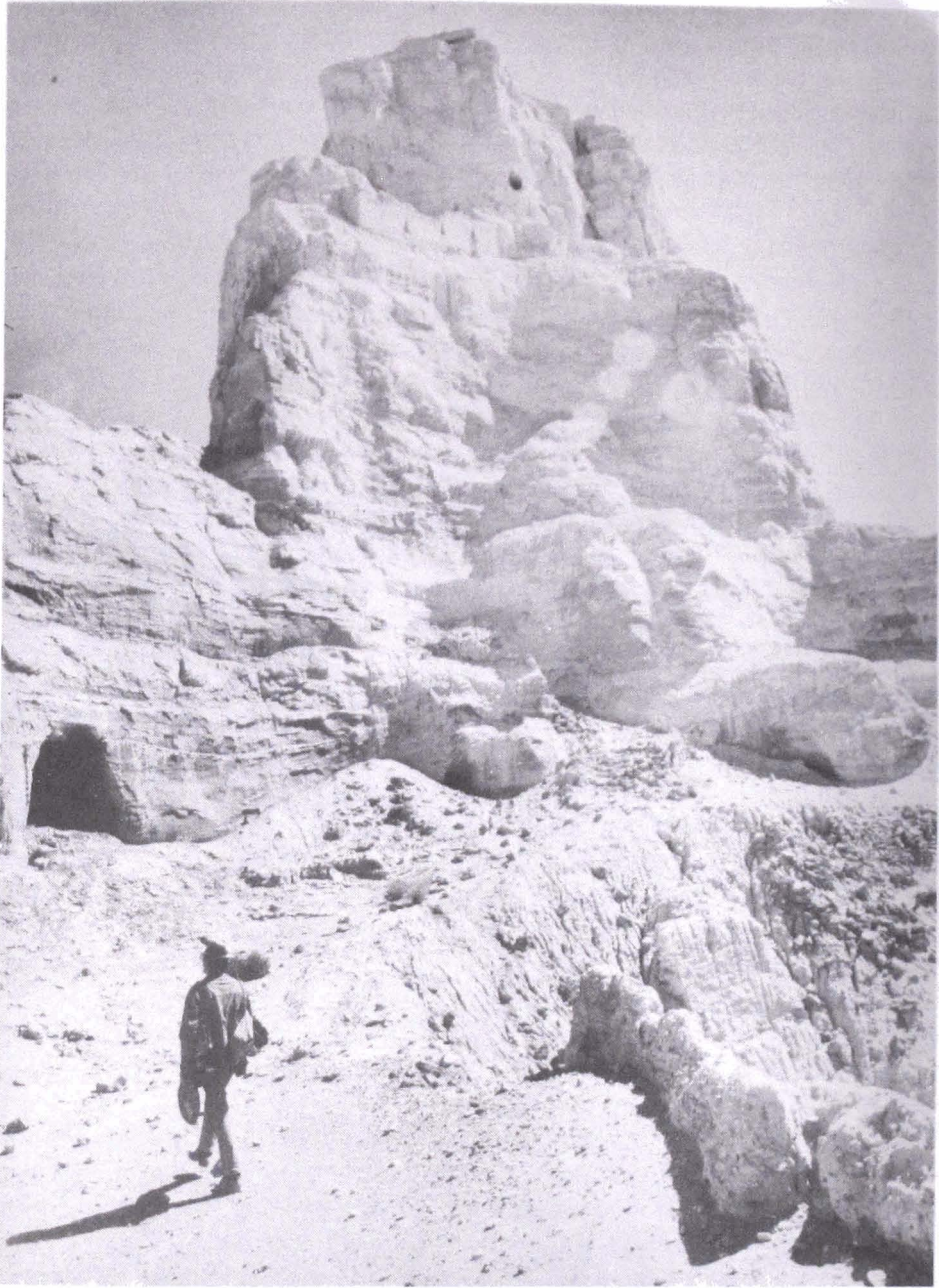
1. *An Introduction to Tibetan Medicine*, by Dawa Norbu. *The Tibetan Review*, New Delhi, 1976.
2. Lecture given by Dr. Lobsang Rapgay at Rigpa Meditation Centre in London, 1985.
3. *Diamond Healing: The Buddhist Medicine and Medical Psychiatry of Tibet*. University Microfilms, U.S.A., 1977. Now republished as *Tibetan Buddhist Medicine & Psychiatry – The Diamond Healing*. Aquarian Press, Wellingborough, Northants, 1984.
4. *Fundamentals of Tibetan Medicine*, by Jigme Tsarong. Tibetan Medical Centre, Dharamsala, 1981.
5. Teachings given by the Ven. Dr. Trogawa Rinpoche at Rigpa Meditation Centre in London, 1984.
6. Nectar, which is purifying and healing.

### POSTSCRIPT:

Readers who may be interested in pursuing both Tibetan Medicine as such and its spiritual aspects further may contact:

**(a) The Dharma Therapy Trust**, which functions in conjunction with the Lam Rim Centre in Wales and the new Tibetan Cultural Centre in Cambridge. Contact: Gail Minter, Secretary D.T.T., Lower Fosse Cottage, Fosse Road, Oakhill, Bath BA3 5HX.

**(b) The Study Group for Tibetan Medicine (UK)** which is under the Patronage of His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet, which publishes a bi-annual journal, MYROBALAM. Contact: Tom Dummer, Secretary, S.G.T.M., "Hawthorne Cottage", Hampstead Lane, Yalding, Maidstone, Kent ME18 6HG.



## The Lost Kingdom of Gu-gé:

by Brian Beresford

*FOREWORD: In September 1986, Brian Beresford and Sean Jones managed to reach the ruins of the ancient cities of Tsaparang and Thöling in the upper Sutlej valley, an extremely arid and secluded part of S.W. Tibet. The surrounding region once comprised the legendary land of Shang-shung, the cradle of Tibetan civilization, whose central province, Gu-gé, was ruled by independent kings from around the dawn of the Christian era until 1650. Only a handful of Westerners have ever visited here, but this privileged group includes two notable Buddhists: Lama Anagarika Govinda (1948/9) and Prof. Giuseppe Tucci (1932). Brian and Sean had special permission to film and photograph the incomparable examples of tantric*

## THE LOST KINGDOM OF GU-GÉ

*Buddhist art dating from the period of the first transmission of Buddhism to Tibet that adorn the interiors of the temples and shrines of these once majestic Buddhist cities.*

Our footsteps were muffled by the powdery white dust of the narrow pathways that ascended steeply through the ruins of Tsaparang. We were climbing through a maze of roofless buildings stacked one on top of the other like a giant castle of cards: now broken and jagged, now jutting out from the sheer sides of the lower portions of the natural citadel that rises to a height of more than 1000 ft. above the valley floor. We were hoping to find the secret tunnel running through the very heart of the mountain that we knew would give us access to the palaces of the ancient kings of Gu-gé perched on the very summit of this precipitous rock.

The sense of anticipation and excitement I felt at what we might find there was heightened by our discovery the previous day that the great Red and White Temples situated on the lower slopes of Tsaparang were still fundamentally intact. Within their walls we had found what are possibly the finest examples of tantric Buddhist art in existence: huge murals stretching from floor to ceiling depicting the Buddha and all the Bodhisattvas and Dhyani-Buddhas of the Tantric Mandala. The ones in the White Temple date from the 10th-12th centuries, those in the Red Temple from around the 15th century; and they were amazingly still in almost pristine condition, their colours vibrant yet subtle and in striking contrast to those of the arid, bleached-out landscape of the canyonlands of the upper Sutlej Valley lying just outside. Would we find the murals in the Demchog Mandala Temple in the ruins above to be so free from damage? Would there be enough light for our film and video cameras? Such thoughts were quickly dismissed by the sheer sense of joy at simply being present in the sanctified ambience of what must have once been one of the greatest centres of Buddhist study and practice in Tibet.

As we went higher, passing through ancient alleyways, negotiating narrow ledges and skirting the caves and tunnels that honeycombed the soft silica rock, we began to have a clearer view of the imposing heights of the citadel. It seemed to be virtually impregnable.

When we reached the base of the actual cliff, it did not take us long to find the hidden tunnel-entrance in one of the caves. A stairway had been hewn out of the very rock itself. As I stepped out of the glare of the early morning sunshine into the shadows of the tunnel, pierced here and there by shafts of light entering through openings cut through the rock, memories of my own past mingled with projections of what this extraordinary city must actually have been like when its temples and houses had been alive with activity. Images more fantastic than the myth of Shangri-la sprang to mind: a civilization of refined culture and high spiritual development ruled over by *Dharma Rajas* (religious kings), who guided their subjects in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha and who patronized a *sangha* of dedicated spiritual practitioners. The evidence of the works of art alone amply testified that the quest for supreme knowledge and the state of Enlightenment had been living realities here.

But then about 350 years ago the river had changed its course, reducing what had once been a lush, irrigated valley into a desiccated desert. That great

White Tara,  
Red Temple,  
Tsaparang

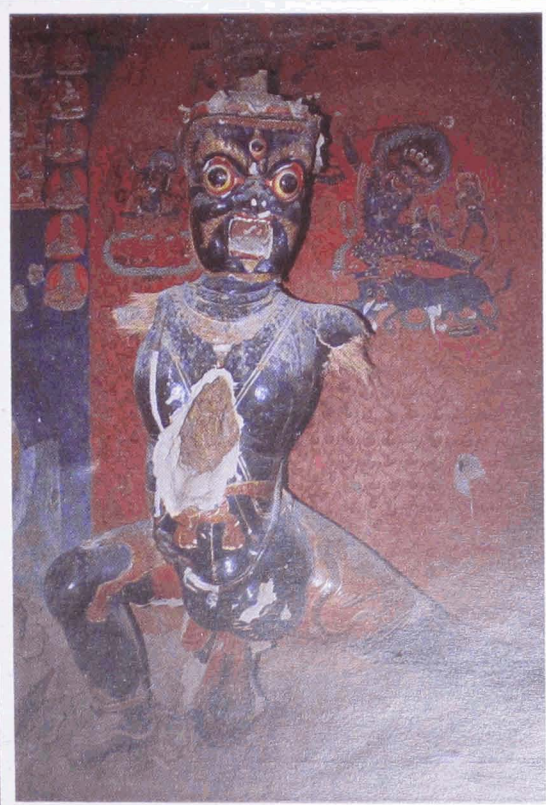


# ART TREASURES of Tsaparang and Thöling

Photographs by Brian Beresford and Sean Jones © 1987



Ceiling of the Demchog Manala Temple, Tsaparang



Dharmaraja door guardian to the White Temple



Interior of the  
White Temple,  
Tsaparang





Mahaprajnaparamita, The Great Mother of  
the Transcending Perfection of Wisdom,  
The White Temple, Tholing

Buddhist kingdom had been summarily brought to collapse; its great temples and palaces were abandoned; the *Dharma* moved elsewhere. *Impermanence* — the greatest of teachings, ruthlessly dispelling all myths and fantasies!

The stairway seemed interminable. As I climbed on, I thought of Lama Govinda, who had made his way up here during the bitterly cold winter of 1948/9. He was the last Westerner to have seen the great art treasures of Tsaparang before the depredations of the Cultural Revolution. As though anticipating a catastrophe, he and his wife, Li Gotami, had spent several months laboriously tracing the murals in the Red and White Temples, especially those depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha. How pleased he would be if he were still alive to know



*Desecrated image of Avalokitesvara*

that they were still intact. Some special protective force must have shielded them during the wanton and wholesale orgy of destruction whose tragic results we had witnessed everywhere in Tibet. The statues, however, had fared less well; they had either been destroyed or their hearts had been hacked open. Perhaps because it was a ruin and hence not an active place of worship, Tsaparang had been spared the full attentions of the desecrators; its remoteness must also have been a contributory factor. As for the Demchog Mandala for which we were now bound, it had been ruined in Govinda's time so we did not hold out hopes of finding much there.

At last we rounded a corner in the tunnel and found ourselves bathed in brilliant sunshine amidst a complex of ruins and walkways covering the entire summit of the citadel: an area of about 20/30 by 200 yards bounded by perimeter battlements that rose above the cliffs falling away sheerly on every side. Away to the south we could see the ruins of the King's Summer Palace and also his Winter Palace, which consisted of a series of caves in the mountain itself. To the north were what looked like the ruins of large temples and halls. Between them there was a small red temple, still remarkably intact. The whole landscape had been bleached by the intense sunlight.

We swung open the doors and stepped into the Demchog Mandala. There, facing us directly, was a mural glowing with brilliant colour. It depicted the five deities of Guhyasamaja: the Highest Yoga Tantra aspect of Vajrapani, the power of the Buddha. They were life-size and held us spellbound. Along the left-hand wall was another set of five deities, this time wrathful and embracing their consorts in sexual union. These powerfully symbolized the polarities of existence: male and female, wisdom and compassion, appearance and emptiness, bliss and void. I recognized them immediately as the five mandala aspects of Demchog (*Skt.*: Chakrasamvara), the tantric deity who

## THE LOST KINGDOM OF GU-GÉ

symbolizes the compassion of an enlightened being. On the opposite wall were the deities of Hevajra, a wrathful figure linked with wisdom. On the back walls, to either side of the doorway, there were powerful images of Mahakala, the chief protector of Highest Yoga Tantra.

Beneath the deities and running right around the three main walls there was a frieze. Here there were pictures of *dakinis* and all the horrors of the charnel ground — terrifying places traditionally associated with certain tantric *mahasiddhas* [adepts or tantric masters]. Another complimentary frieze ran along the top; this depicted mainly *mahasiddhas* and tantric lineage masters. At one end I noticed a representation of Jé Tsongkhapa. As he died in 1470 and the city was deserted in 1650, this temple can be dated around the end of the 16th/beginning of the 17th century.

A circular raised platform perhaps 10 feet in diameter lay on the floor in the centre of the room surrounded by a series of concentric rings of lotus petals. Here must have stood the complete three-dimensional model of the Mandala of Demchog. Most of it had disappeared; only a litter of broken fragments now remained. I have since discovered that Prof. Tucci removed some of the small figures. Also littered around the tiny room were chunks of chain-mail armour, still shining in parts, each plate joined to the next by leathern thongs. It was difficult to photograph the murals without stepping on broken relics of the past!

Our visit to this small temple proved to be a fitting climax to our visit to Western Tibet. It had been nearly four months since we had crossed from Pakistan into the western Chinese province of Sinkiang by the Karakoram Highway. There we had stayed in the ancient oasis city of Kashgar, once a thriving waystation on the Silk Road, before travelling on to Tun-huang. Then we had turned southwards and made for Lhasa across the vast wastelands of the Tibetan plateau. A 2-week ordeal by truck subsequently brought



us to Western Tibet, where our main concern was to perform the traditional pilgrimages around the sacred Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar. [*Brian will deal with these in the next instalment of his story — Ed.*]

The final leg to Tsaparang and Thöling (now known as Tsada) had only been possible through patience and persistence, and the cooperation of the local Chinese authorities. Many days were spent waiting for the necessary combination of circumstances to come together. When it finally did, we were able to complete our journey — another arduous one, by jeep this time — in two days. It was not, however, without its moments of tension with our driver and Tibetan Communist-party guide!

We made Thöling our base and photographed the interiors of the Red and White Temples there. Although not as spectacular as Tsaparang, this ancient city was also very impressive. Sadly we found its great Golden Temple in ruins. This had once been a three-dimensional mandala constructed by the great 10th century Tibetan translator Rinchen Zangpo. However, the Red Temple was not only intact but had been recently re-consecrated as an active shrine. On its walls were paintings of deities, endlessly repeated and entwined with organic decorative motifs. Unfortunately, nearly all the murals here were coated with a thick layer of dust and grime, making it virtually impossible to see them clearly. We discovered, however, that by wiping them gently with a damp cloth their colours and details were revealed. Our hope is that these beautiful works of art will one day be cleaned and restored to their original splendour.

Across from this temple is the White Temple of Thöling. To get to it you have to pass a public latrine, placed, for maximum disrespect, in the very middle of this sacred complex of shrines. Like many of the temples left intact during the Cultural Revolution, it was used as a storehouse and evidence of this was still to be found. Green shoots sprouted where grain had been spilt in the crevices between the flagstones — and the one eye of a large Buddha with a broken arm stared down from an empty wall. A few of the local children along with their parents ventured inside with us and held their palms together in prayer and veneration. Respect for sacred objects and paintings is implanted deep in the Tibetan psyche; even the gross events of recent years have not expunged it.

Most of the paintings of male Bodhisattvas along one wall of the White Temple of Thöling had been damaged by water-seepage. Happily, the murals of female Bodhisattvas facing them on the opposite wall were in near perfect condition. Like the other paintings of the Gu-gé style, these are embellished with decorative thrones, backgrounds, halos and surrounds. The local artists had clearly been ready to draw from every possible resource to enrich and ennoble their creations with a wealth of embellishment. At the same time this was far from arbitrary. Each deity was placed in a setting that was entirely in accord with its principal characteristics and symbolic activity. For instance, the great figure of Maha-prajñāparamita — the 'Great Mother' of the Transcendental Perfection of Wisdom — is given, in accordance with her supreme status, a throne in the form of a luxurious palace in whose chambers goddesses, kings, queens and courtiers all turn to pay homage to the regal figure in the centre. Only two demoniac figures in black disdainfully turn their backs! These must be personifications of ignorance: the lack of

awareness of Emptiness, which is the true nature of reality. The central figure is herself golden; her pose and expression convey an air of supreme tranquillity and insight — the very personification of the union of *shamata* and *vipasyana*.

Sadly our time among these noble testaments to the perfection of the master painter's craft was limited to just five days. My companion Sean and I worked from morning till night, photographing as much as we could. All the time we had to contend with constant pressure from our driver and guide to hasten back to our base in the township of Purang (Taklakot), in the Kailash-Manasarovar area.

So our visit to Western Tibet was brought to a fitting culmination. As our Tibetan and Chinese hosts had said: "It is a treasure of ancient art which is part of the heritage of all mankind on this planet".

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© photographs, Brian Beresford & Sean Jones, 1987

(Next issue: *Pilgrimage to Kailash and Manasarovar*)

# The Highest Standard of Contentment

by Ven. Ajahn Sumedho

(From a *desana* on *The Family* given at Amaravati in October 1986)

**I**n a country like this so much disillusionment comes from the realisation that getting everything you want is depressing. You find that in Switzerland too, and other countries with higher standards of living than this one: the more wealth and welfare, the more controlled and abundant and safe a society is, the more depression people feel. It's smothering, and not satisfying. I've had enough opportunity to get whatever things I want to realise that passing the rest of my life getting and spending money is the most bleak prospect! I'd prefer the excitement of a little poverty or an interesting challenge to the continuous outflow of wealth and security — *Ugh!*

I went to India as a monk in 1974. Being an alms-mendicant one can't handle money, so someone bought a return plane ticket from Bangkok to Calcutta. That way I found myself in Calcutta with no money, only an alms-bowl. Then I thought to myself: "Now you're really going to find out if this thing works or not!"

In Thailand you just knew that everything would be taken care of. Thailand is the paradise where good bhikkhus get reborn! But in India I didn't know what to expect, except I really had to look at myself all the time because at first there was panic — "You'll probably get dystentery and die . . ."

Calcutta is bad enough at any time but in 1974 all the refugees from Bangla Desh were streaming in. The whole city was cluttered; every place was taken up with refugees — they were sleeping on the pavements and in the train stations. To board a train you had to walk over people's bodies. It was really quite daunting for me. And yet, when I look back . . .

I remember going to Benares. Being a holy city, it's filled with beggars