

Divine reincarnations in Tibet



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S O LITTLE IS KNOWN BY EUROPEANS of what is going on in Tibet, and even in the more accessible Bhutan, that an Anglo-Indian paper — one of those which pretend to know, and certainly discuss every blessed subject, whether they really know anything of it or not — actually came out with the following bit of valuable information:

It may not be generally known that the Deb Raja of Bhutan, who died in June last, but whose decease has been kept dark till the present moment, probably to prevent disturbances, is our old and successful opponent of 1864-65. . . . *The Bhutan Government consists of a spiritual chief called the Dhurm Raja, an incarnation of Buddha [?!] who never dies* — and a civil ruler called the Deb Raja in whom is supposed to centre all authority.

A more ignorant assertion could hardly have been made. It may be argued that “Christian” writers believe even less in Buddha’s reincarnations than the Buddhists of Ceylon, and, therefore, trouble themselves very little, whether or not they are accurate in their statements. But, in such a case, why touch a subject at all? Large sums are annually spent by Governments to secure old Asiatic manuscripts and learn the truth about old religions and peoples, and it is not showing respect for either science or truth to mislead people interested in them by a flippant and contemptuous treatment of facts.

On the authority of direct information received at our Headquarters, we will try to give a more correct view of the situation than has hitherto been had from books. Our informants are:

Firstly — some very learned Lamas;

Secondly — a European gentleman and traveller, who prefers not to give his name; and

Thirdly — a highly educated young Chinaman, brought up in America, who has since preferred to the luxuries of worldly life and the pleasures of Western civilization, the comparative privations of a religious and contemplative life in Tibet.

Both of the two last-named gentlemen are Fellows of our Society, and the latter — our “Celestial” Brother, losing, moreover, no opportunity of corresponding with us. A message from him has been just received *via* Darjeeling.

In the present article, it is not much that we will have to say. Beyond contradicting the queer notion of the Bhutanese Dharma Raja being “an incarnation of Buddha,”

we will only point out a few absurdities, in which some prejudiced writers have indulged.

It certainly was never known — least of all in Tibet — that the spiritual chief of the Bhutanese was “an incarnation of Buddha, who never dies.” The “Dug-pa¹ or Red Caps” belong to the old *Nīngmapa* sect, who resisted the religious reform introduced by Tsong-Kha-pa between the latter part of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries. It was only after a Lama coming to them from Tibet in the tenth century had converted them from the old Buddhist faith — so strongly mixed up with the Bön practices of the aborigines — into the Shammar sect, that, in opposition to the reformed “Gelukpas,” the Bhutanese set up a regular system of reincarnations. It is not Buddha though, or “Sang-gyas” — as he is called by the Tibetans — who incarnates himself in the Dharma Raja, but quite another personage; one of whom we will speak later on.

Now what do the Orientalists know of Tibet, its civil administration, and especially its religion and its rites? That, which they have learned from the contradictory, and in every case imperfect statements of a few Roman Catholic monks, and of two or three daring lay travellers, who, ignorant of the language, could scarcely be expected to give us even a bird’s-eye view of the country. The missionaries, who introduced themselves in 1719 stealthily into Lhasa,² were suffered to remain there but a short time and were finally forcibly expelled from Tibet. The letters of the Jesuits, Desideri, and Johann Grueber, and especially that of Fra della Penna, teem with the greatest absurdities.³ Certainly as superstitious, and apparently far more so than the ignorant Tibetans themselves, on whom they father every iniquity, one has but to read these letters to recognize in them that spirit or *odium theologicum* felt by every Christian, and especially Catholic missionary, for the “heathen” and their creeds; a spirit which blinds one entirely to the sense of justice. And when could have been found any better opportunity to ventilate their monkish ill-humour and vindictiveness than in the matter of Tibet, the very land of mystery, mysticism and seclusion? Beside these few prejudiced “historians,” but five more men of Europe ever stepped into Tibet. Of these, three — Bogle, Hamilton and Turner — penetrated no farther than its borderlands; Manning — the only European who is known to have set his foot into Lhasa⁴ — died without revealing its secrets, for reasons suspected, though never admitted, by his only surviving nephew — a clergyman; and Csoma de Körös, who never went beyond Zanskar, and the Lamasery of Phäg-dal.⁵

¹ The term “Dug-pa” in Tibet is deprecatory. They themselves pronounce it “Dög-pa” from the root “to bind” (religious binders to the old faith); while the paramount sect — the Gelukpas (yellow caps) — and the people, use the word in the sense of Dug-pa *mischief-makers, sorcerers*. The Bhutanese are generally called Dug-pa throughout Tibet and even in some parts of Northern India.

² Out of twelve Capuchin friars who, under the leadership of Father della Penna, established a mission at Lhasa nine died shortly after, and only three returned home to tell the tale. (See *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet, etc.*, by Clements R. Markham C.B., F.R.S.; London: Trübner & Co., 1876, pp. lix-lx.)

³ See Appendix to *Narratives, etc.*, by C.R. Markham.

⁴ We speak of the present century. It is very dubious whether the two missionaries Huc and Gabet ever entered Lhasa. The Lamas deny it.

⁵ We are well aware that the name is generally written *Pugdal*, but it is erroneous to do so. “Pugdal” means nothing, and the Tibetans do not give meaningless names to their sacred buildings. We do not know how Csoma de Körös spells it, but, as in the case of *Pho-ta-la* of Lhasa loosely spelt “Potala” — the Lamasery of Phäg-dal derives its name from Phäg-pa (phäg — eminent in holiness, Buddha-like, spiritual; and *pa* — man, father), the

The regular system of the Lamaic incarnations of “Sanggyas” (or Buddha) began with Tsong-Kha-pa. This reformer is not the incarnation of one of the five celestial Dhyānis, or heavenly Buddhas, as is generally supposed, said to have been created by Śākya Muni after he had risen to Nirvana, but that of “Amita,” one of the Chinese names for Buddha. The records preserved in the Gompa (Lamasery) of “Tashi-Lhünpo” (spelt by the English *Teshu Lumbo*) show that Sang-gyas incarnated himself in Tsong-Kha-pa in consequence of the great degradation his doctrines had fallen into. Until then, there had been no other incarnations than those of the five celestial Buddhas and of their Bodhisattvas, each of the former having created (read, overshadowed with his spiritual wisdom) five of the last-named — there were, and now are in all but thirty incarnations — five Dhyānis and twenty-five Bodhisattvas. It was because, among many other reforms, Tsong-Kha-pa forbade necromancy (which is practiced to this day, with the most disgusting rites, by the Böns — the aborigines of Tibet — with whom the Red Caps, or Shammars, had always fraternized), that the latter resisted his authority. This act was followed by a split between the two sects. Separating entirely from the Gelukpas, the Dugpas (Red Caps) — from the first in a great minority — settled in various parts of Tibet, chiefly its borderlands, and principally in Nepal and Bhutan. But, while they retained a sort of independence at the monastery of Śākya-Jong, the Tibetan residence of their spiritual (?) chief Gong-ssso Rinpoche, the Bhutanese have been from their beginning the tributaries and vassals of the Taley-Lamas. In his letter to Warren Hastings in 1774, the Tashi-Lama, who calls the Bhutanese “a rude and ignorant race,” whose “Deb Raja is dependent upon the Taley-Lama,” omits to say that they are also the tributaries of his own State and have been now for over three centuries and a half. The Tashi-Lamas were always more powerful and more highly considered than the Taley-Lamas. The latter are the creation of the Tashi-Lama, Nabang-Lob Sang, the sixth incarnation of Tsong-Kha-pa — himself an incarnation of Amitābha, or Buddha.¹ This hierarchy was regularly installed at Lhasa, but it originated only in the latter half of the seventeenth century.²

In Mr. C.R. Markham’s highly interesting work above noticed, the author has gathered every scrap of information that was ever brought to Europe about that *terra in-*

title of “Avalokiteśvara,” the Bodhisattva who incarnates himself in the Taley-Lama of Lhasa. The valley of the Ganges where Buddha preached and lived is also called “Phäg-yul,” the holy, spiritual land; the word *phäg* coming from the one root — Phä or Phö being the corruption of Fo (or Buddha), as the Tibetan alphabet contains no letter F.

¹ [The official lists of the Taley-Lamas and the Tashi-Lamas, printed and published by the Tashi-Lhünpo monastery in Tibet, record that the first Taley-Lama was instituted in 1419, following the passing of Tsong-Kha-pa. Furthermore, Nabang-Lob-Sang (in Tibetan spelling Nag-dbang-blo-bsang; underlined letters not being pronounced) was the fifth Taley-Lama (he may be termed the *sixth* when Tsong-Kha-pa is included, although the latter is not included in the Tashi-Lhünpo printing). Moreover, it was the Taley-Lama Nabang-Lob-Sang who instituted his revered teacher, blo-bsang ch’os-kyi rhyal-mts’an (1569-1662) as the first Grand Lama of Tashi-Lhünpo, thus establishing the Tashi-Lama Hierarchy, according to the official listing. Since both Grand Lamas had the name of Lob-Sang, the confusion is easily accounted for. (Cf. L.A. Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet, or Lamaism*, pp. 233-36. — Boris de Zirkoff.)

² Says Mr. Markham in *Tibet* (Preface, p. xlvii): “Gedun-tubpa [Ganden Truppa], another great reformer, was contemporary with Tsong-Kha-pa, having been born in 1339, and dying in 1474 [having thus lived 135 years]. He built the monastery at Teshu Lumbo [Tashi-Lhunpo] in 1445, and it was in the person of this perfect Lama, as he was called, that the system of perpetual incarnation commenced. He was himself the incarnation of Bodhisattva Padma Pani, and on his death he relinquished the attainment of Buddhahood that he might be born again and again for the benefit of mankind. When he died, his successor was found as an infant, by the possession of certain divine marks.”

[Ganden Truppa was the grandnephew of Tsong-Kha-pa and the first Taley-Lama; the Official List of the Taley-Lamas state that his birth took place in 1391 and his death in 1475. — Boris de Zirkoff.]

cognita. It contains one passage, which, to our mind, sums up in a few words the erroneous views taken by the Orientalists of Lamaism in general, and of its system of perpetual reincarnation especially.

. . . It was, indeed, at about the period of Hiuen-Thsang's journey that Buddhism first began to find its way into Tibet, both from the direction of China and that of India; but it came in a very different form from that in which it reached Ceylon several centuries earlier. Traditions, metaphysical speculations, and new dogmas had overlaid the original Scriptures with an enormous collection of more recent revelation. Thus Tibet received a vast body of truth, and could only assimilate a portion for the establishment of a popular belief. Since the original Scriptures had been conveyed into Ceylon by the son of Aśoka, it had been revealed to the devout Buddhists of India that their Lord had created the five Dhyāni or celestial Buddhas, and that each of these had created five Bodhisattvas, or beings in the course of attaining Buddha-hood. The Tibetans took firm hold of this phase of the Buddhistic creed, and their distinctive belief is that the Bodhisattvas continue to remain in existence for the good of mankind by passing through a succession of human beings from the cradle to the grave. This characteristic of their faith was gradually developed, and it was long before it received its present form;¹ but the succession of incarnate Bodhisattvas was the idea towards which the Tibetan mind tended from the first. At the same time, as Max Müller says:

“The most important element of the Buddhist reform has always been its social and moral code, not its metaphysical theories. That moral code, taken by itself, is one of the most perfect which the world has ever known”;

and it was this blessing that the introduction of Buddhism brought into Tibet.²

The “blessing” has remained and spread all over the country, there being no kinder, purer-minded, more simple or sin-fearing nation than the Tibetans, missionary slanders notwithstanding.³ But yet, for all that, the popular Lamaism, when compared with the real esoteric, or Arahat Buddhism of Tibet, offers a contrast as great as the

¹ Its “present” is its *earliest* form, as we will try to show further on. A correct analysis of any religion viewed but from its popular aspect, becomes impossible — least of all Lamaism, or esoteric Buddhism as disfigured by the untutored imaginative fervour of the populace. There is a vaster difference between the “Lamaism” of the learned classes of the clergy and the ignorant masses of their parishioners, than there is between the Christianity of a Bishop Berkeley and that of a modern Irish peasant. Hitherto Orientalists have made themselves superficially acquainted but with the beliefs and rites of popular Buddhism in Tibet, chiefly through the distorting glasses of missionaries which throw out of focus every religion but their own. The same course has been followed in respect to Sinhalese Buddhism, the missionaries having, as Col. Olcott observes in the too brief Preface to *his Buddhist Catechism*, for many years been taunting the Sinhalese with the “puerility and absurdity of their religion” when, in point of fact, what they make [fun] of is not orthodox Buddhism at all. Buddhist folklore and fairy stories are the accretions of twenty-six centuries.

² Introduction, pp. xlv-xlvi

³ The reader has but to compare in Mr. Markham's *Tibet* the warm, impartial and frank praises bestowed by Bogle and Turner on the Tibetan character and moral standing and the enthusiastic eulogies of Thomas Manning to the address of the Taley-Lama and his people, with the three letters of the three Jesuits in the Appendix, to enable himself to form a decisive opinion. While the former three gentlemen, impartial narrators, having no object to distort truth, hardly find sufficient adjectives to express their satisfaction with the Tibetans, the three “men of God” pick no better terms for the Taley-Lamas and the Tibetans than “their devilish *God the Father*”. . . “vindictive devils” “fiends who know how to dissemble,” who are “cowardly, arrogant, and proud” . . . “dirty and immoral,” *etc., etc., etc.*, all in the same strain for the sake of truth and Christian charity!

snow trodden along a road in the valley, to the pure and undefiled mass which glitters on the top of a high mountain peak.¹ A few of such mistaken notions about the latter, we will now endeavour to correct as far as it is compatible to do so.

Before it can be clearly shown how the Bhutanese were forcibly brought into subjection, and their Dharma Raja made to accept the “incarnations” only after these had been examined into, and recognized at Lhasa, we have to throw a retrospective glance at the state of the Tibetan religion during the seven centuries which preceded the reform. As said before, a Lama had come to Bhutan from Kham — that province which had always been the stronghold and the hot-bed of the “Shammar” or Bön rites² — between the ninth and tenth centuries, and had converted them into what he called Buddhism. But in those days, the pure religion of Śākya Muni had already commenced degenerating into that Lamaism, or rather fetishism, against which four centuries later, Tsong-Kha-pa rose with all his might. Though three centuries had only passed since Tibet had been converted (with the exception of a handful of Shammars and Böns), yet esoteric Buddhism had crept far earlier into the country. It had begun superseding the ancient popular rites ever since the time when the Brahmans of India, getting again the upper hand over Aśoka’s Buddhism, were silently preparing to oppose it, an opposition which culminated in their finally and entirely driving the new faith out of the country. The brotherhood or community of the ascetics known as the *Byang-tsiub* — the “Accomplished” and the “Perfect” existed before Buddhism spread in Tibet, and was known, and so mentioned in the pre-Buddhistic books of China as the fraternity of the “great teachers of the snowy mountains.”

Buddhism was introduced into Bod-yul in the beginning of the seventh century by a pious Chinese Princess, who had married a Tibetan King,³ who was converted by her from the Bön religion into Buddhism, and had become since then a pillar of the faith in Tibet, as Aśoka had been nine centuries earlier in India. It was he who sent his minister — according to European Orientalists; his own brother, the first Lama in the country — according to Tibetan historical records — to India. This brother minister returned

. . . with the great body of truth contained in the Buddhist canonical Scriptures, framed the Tibetan alphabet from the Devanāgarī of India, and commenced the translation of the canon from Sanskrit — it had previously been translated from Pali, the old language of Magadha into Sanskrit — into the language of the country.^{4, 1}

¹ As Father Desideri has it in one of his very few correct remarks about the Lamas of Tibet, “though many may know how to read their mysterious books, not one can explain them” — an observation by-the-by, which might be applied with as much justice to the Christian as to the Tibetan clergy. (See Appendix, *Tibet*, p. 306.)

² The Shammar sect is not, as wrongly supposed, a kind of corrupted Buddhism, but an offshoot of the Bön religion — itself a degenerated remnant of the Chaldean mysteries of old, now a religion entirely based upon necromancy, sorcery and sooth-saying. The introduction of Buddha’s name in it means nothing.

³ A widely spread tradition tells us that after ten years of married life, with her husband’s consent, she renounced it, and in the garb of a nun — a *Gelong-ma*, or “Ani,” she preached Buddhism all over the country, as, several centuries earlier, the Princess Sanghamitta, Aśoka’s daughter, had preached it in India and Ceylon.

⁴ See Markham’s *Tibet*, p. xlvi.

Under the old rule and before the reformation, the high Lamas were often permitted to marry, *so as to incarnate themselves in their own direct descendants* — a custom which Tsong-Kha-pa abolished, strictly enjoining celibacy on the Lamas. The Lama Enlightener of Bhutan had a son whom he had brought with him. In this son's first male child born after his death the Lama had promised the people to reincarnate himself. About a year after the event — so goes the religious legend — the son was blessed by his Bhutanese wife with triplets, all the three boys! Under this embarrassing circumstance, which would have floored any other casuists, the Asiatic metaphysical acuteness was fully exhibited. The spirit of the deceased Lama — the people were told — incarnated himself in all the three boys. One had his *Om*, the other his *Han*, the third — his *Hoong*. Or (Sanskrit): *Buddha* — divine mind, *Dharma* — matter or animal soul, and *Sangha* — the union of the former two in our phenomenal world. It is this pure Buddhist tenet which was degraded by the cunning Bhutanese clergy to serve the better their ends. Thus their first Lama became a *triple* incarnation, three Lamas, one of whom — they say — got his “body,” the other, his “heart” and the third, his — word or wisdom. This hierarchy lasted with power undivided until the fifteenth century, when a Lama named Dugpa Shab-tung, who had been defeated by the Gelukpas of Ganden Truppa,² invaded Bhutan at the head of his army of monks. Conquering the whole country, he proclaimed himself their first *Dharma* Raja, or Lama Rinpoche — thus starting a third “Gem” in opposition to the two Gelukpa “Gems.” But this “Gem” never rose to the eminence of a Majesty, least of all was he ever considered a “Gem of Learning” or wisdom. He was defeated very soon after his proclamation by Tibetan soldiers, aided by Chinese troops of the Yellow Sect, and forced to come to terms. One of the clauses was the permission to reign spiritually over the Red Caps in Bhutan, provided he consented to reincarnate himself in Lhasa after his death, and make the law hold good for ever. No Dharma Raja since then was ever proclaimed or recognized, unless he was born either at Lhasa or on the Tashi-Lhünpo territory. Another clause was to the effect that the Dharma Rajas should never permit public exhibitions of their rites of sorcery and necromancy, and the third that a sum of money should be paid yearly for the maintenance of a Lamasery, with a school attached where the orphans of Red Caps, and the converted Shammars should be instructed in the “Good Doctrine” of the Gelukpas. That the latter must have had some secret power over the Bhutanese, who are among the most inimical and irreconcilable of their Red-capped enemies, is proved by the fact that Lama Dugpa Shab-tung was reborn at Lhasa, and that to this day the reincarnated Dharma Rajas are sent and installed at Bhutan by the Lhasa and Shigatse authorities. The latter have no concern in the administration save their spiritual authority, and leave the temporal government entirely in the hands of the Deb-Raja and the four Pën-lobs, called in Indian official papers *Penlows*, who in their turn are under the immediate authority of the Lhasa officials.

¹ But, what he does not say (for none of the writers, he derives his information from, knew it) is that this Princess is the one, who is believed to have reincarnated herself since then in a succession of female Lamas or Rim ani — precious nuns. Durjiay Pan-mo of whom Bogle speaks — his Tashi Lama's half-sister — and the superior of the nunnery on the Lake Yam dog-tso or Palti Lake, was one of such reincarnations.

² The builder and founder of Tashi-Lhünpo (Teshu-lumbo) in 1445; called the “Perfect Lama,” or Panchhen — the precious jewel, from the words: *Panchhen*, great teacher, and *Rimpoche*, precious jewel. While the Taley-Lama is only Gyalpo Rimpoche, or “gem of kingly majesty,” the Tashi-Lama of Shigatse is Panchhen Rimpoche or the *Gem of Wisdom and Learning*.

From the above it will be easily understood that no “Dharma Raja” was ever considered as an incarnation of Buddha. The expression that the latter “never dies” applies but to the two great incarnations of equal rank — the Taley and the Tashi-Lamas. Both are incarnations of Buddha, though the former is generally designated as that of Avalokiteśvara, the highest celestial Dhyāni. For him who understands the puzzling mystery by having obtained a key to it, the Gordian knot of these successive reincarnations is easy to untie. He knows that Avalokiteśvara and Buddha are one as Amita-pho¹ (pronounced *Fo*) or Amita-Buddha is identical with the former. What the mystic doctrine of the initiated “Phäg-pa” or “saintly men” (adepts) teaches upon this subject, is not to be revealed to the world at large. The little that can be given out will be found in a paper on the “Holy Lha” which we hope to publish in our next.²



¹ In Tibetan pho and pha — pronounced with a soft labial breath-like sound — means at the same time “man, father.” So *pha-yul* is native land; *pho-nya*, angel, messenger of good news; *pha-me*, ancestors, etc.

² [No such paper, essay or article has ever been identified or located, although there is a certain amount of information on the subject in various miscellaneous material from H.P. Blavatsky’s pen. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]