MEMORIES OF TSHURPHU

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

The first was in 1946 on a journey from Lhasa to Gyantse by way of Tshurphu miles from the monastery by the Chances who escorted me to the Rinpoche’s summer house in a pleasant grove of willows a little way from the monastery. A very large and comfortably carpeted tent had been pitched with, in the middle, a massive beam bedstead standing like an island in an ocean. The Yab Kusho, the Rinpoche’s father, entertained me to lunch after which I was received by the Rinpoche himself in his bright, pleasing room looking out on a little flower garden in which stalked a fine peacock. His room was full of clocks of all kinds and was hung with cages of the birds he loved—budgerigars and canaries.

The Rinpoche was then about 23 years old, a large, calm young man with a ready smile and sense of humour. We enjoyed a long friendly conversation; and then, as I had to leave early on the following day, there was time for only a short visit to the monastery. On the next day I found that the Rinpoche’s kindness had preceded me and that tents were pitched for my party at the halting place in Kharcha Drok, a wide upland grazing ground scattered with yaks.

To the west, not far from my camp, the Lho Avela—the flow northwards towards the Karpo Chhamar monastery of Yangpachen about 30 miles distant and too far for a visit. Beyond the river on the far side of the plain, plumes of steam rose from gyzmes of hot water. The region is now a source of geothermal power for Lhasa.

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

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

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

The principal temple, lofty and dark, contained the famous brass image of Shaiya Muni, known as the Ornaments of the World, made in about 1295 on the instructions of the second Zhi-Nag hierarch, Karma Pakshi. It is about 60 feet high and enshrined relics of the Buddha and of several early religious teachers.

60 feet high brass image enshrined in principal temple

I had the impression that its head was rather flat. There is a well-known story that Karma Pakshi found the image was leaning to one side and that he sat in meditation beside it and by inclining his body brought the image to follow his movement back to the perpendicular.

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

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

I was also shown many fine gilded images including one of the Ninth Zhabamapa (Red Hat) Lama said always to radiate noticeable warmth also one of Lama Zhang who at one time created difficulties for the Karma Lamas but was reconciled to Dun-sum. Many gilded images Khyenpa, and a very gaunt image of Milhepa of Red Hat Lamas said to be self-created, very different from the sturdy figure carved in Chimocero born by a previous incarnation and kept with other previous images in the Rinpoche's private rooms.

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

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

There are also treasures from the earlier connection of the Zha Nag
Lambs with the Mongol Yuan dynasty-porcelain Vases, a carved ivory
panel in the Rinpoché’s room, bronze images, and a great gold seal
inscribed in “Hevajra”, with a dragon on the
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handle. This seal is, I believe, safely preserved
and Chinese Emperors protected it at Rumtek and examination should discover
whether it is that given by Mongke Khagan
to Karina Pakshi and later taken from him by
Kublai and restored to the Lama Raangchung Dorje by the Emperor
Tughr Timur in 1331. I was also shown letters from
Chinese Emperors and many other treasures including palgaden manuscripts.

Our lasting memory of my second visit is the graciousness of
His Holiness in offering to perform the wearing the Black Hat for
our party. It is now fairly well-known in Europe and America but at
that time it was something of a mystery even in
Black Hat wearing Lhasa and my staff were awed
ceremony performed delighted by the honour. We
were all deeply impressed by the solemn ritual
with its bursts of thrilling music and by the grave
concentration with which the Rinpoché performed it. At the end, when
he gave me a scarf of blessings which I still have, I was greatly surprised
and moved to be greeted by him with the touching of foreheads
(drub-thag). And with that in my mind I join the nyor-ru gurl-c’dje, the
prayer that his reincarnation may speedily appear for the benefit of sentient beings.