The Advent of the *Dharma*

Religion and Rationality in the Coming of Buddhism to Tibet

Sam van Schaik

It is an open question whether the religious practices that existed in Tibet before Buddhism should be called ‘Bon’ or should even be categorised as ‘religious’. There were certainly various complexes of rituals and narratives practised throughout the Tibetan cultural area, but the hierarchical structures and generally accepted metanarratives that we associate with the religion were absent. It may be better to understand the rituals and narratives before the institution of Buddhism in terms of the idea of tradition, ‘an unsystematic array of cultural elements that have been made available to particular social groups in different times and contexts.’[1] Research into early Tibetan documents, especially those found in the hidden cave in Dunhuang at the beginning of the twentieth century, has suggested that the idea of Bon as an alternative religion (or in Tibetan terms, as *chos*) in opposition to Buddhism actually came from Buddhist polemical writings.[2]

Nevertheless, the cultural elements of pre-Buddhist Tibet did not disappear, and to some extent were absorbed into the new religion. A potent example of this is the mythos that developed around the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet. This fundamental episode in Tibetan Buddhist history is known in Tibetan as “the advent of the sublime *dharma*” (*dam pa’i chos kyi dbu brnyes pa*). This story, which goes back to the earliest Tibetan Buddhist histories, tells us that Buddhism first came to Tibet during the reign of King Lha Tho tho ri Snyan btsan. This king ruled five generations before Srong btsan Sgam po, the great empire-builder who ruled in the first half of the seventh century.

One day, the story goes, a number of Buddhist objects fell from the sky and landed on the roof of the royal palace, often identified as the Yum bu temple. The objects differ in different accounts, but often include a cubit-high golden *stūpa* and a mold or stamp of the *Ciṇṭamāṇi dhāraṇī*. The texts include the *Kāraṇḍavyūha sūtra* and a more obscure text called the *Pang kong phyag rgya pa*. At that time nobody in Tibet, including the king himself, could read, and so the books were placed in a casket. The king regularly made offerings to the casket of books, which he called the “holy secret” (*gnyan po gsang ba*). The title refers to the books being sacred, yet unreadable. Despite being unable to benefit from the texts themselves, when the king reached the age of eighty his devotions to the holy secret caused him to become youthful again, so that he was able to live twice in one lifetime.[3]

---

1 Honko 1996: 19.

2 For the basis of the argument here, see van Schaik 2013.

3 The story is found in the various versions of the *Testament of Ba*, including the *Dba’ bzhed* (see Wangdu and Diemberger 2000: 24-25). Another early source is the *Bka’ chems ka khol ma* (1989 ed.): 91.

It is said that the books of the holy secret were not deciphered until five generations later, when Srong btsan Sgam po sent a young man called Thon mi Sambhoṭa to India to create a Tibetan alphabet. After returning to Tibet, Thon mi Sambhoṭa opened the casket and translated the books inside. What he found when he opened the casket differs slightly in various accounts, but is usually said to include the *Kāraṇḍavyūha sūtra* and a more obscure text which is probably of Chinese origin and can be traced back to a prayer called the *Pang kong phyag rgya pa*.

The objects that fell upon the palace roof in these stories have considerable cultural significance. The descent itself mirrors the traditional Tibetan legends of the descent of the divine ancestors of the *btsan po*, but here the ancestor figure is replaced with textual and material religious objects. The golden *stūpa* is a representation of the buddha's body, while the *Kāraṇḍavyūha sūtra* is the scriptural source of the six-syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara: *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*. The reason for the presence of the much more obscure prayer, the *Pang kong phyag rgya pa* is somewhat less obvious, although this is the object that appears most consistently across different versions of this story.

The canonical versions of this prayer tend to have the Tibetanised name: *Dpang skong phyag brgya pa*. In the histories we usually find the title given as *(s)Pang kong phyag rgya pa* or as *Mu tra'i phyag rgya*. Both titles appear in Nel pa Paṇḍita's history, and it is not clear whether he regards them as different texts or not.[4] Several copies of the prayer are found among the Dunhuang manuscripts; and the fullest title given in these versions is *Pam kong brgya rtsa brgyad* (IOL Tib J 315/4). The first part (*Pam/Pang kong*) is probably a transcription of a Chinese term. The most likely explanation is that it refers to the repentance prayer text known in Chinese as *Datong fangguang* (大通方廣). This sutra was translated into Tibetan, and appears in the Dunhuang manuscripts with the title "Great Pang kong" (*Pang kong chen po*). A shorter prayer that also appears in Dunhuang is known as the "Lesser Pang kong" *(Pang kong chung ngu)* or "The Hundred Pangkong" *(Pang kong brgya pa)*. The similarity of this last title to the ones in the histories suggests that this was the text that was held to have fallen on the palace roof. This repentance text is an emblem of the key monastic ritual of Buddhism, the regular repentance ceremony. In Chinese Buddhism, it also played a role in the interface between Buddhist monastic communities and the rulers who patronised them.[5]

In any case, the motif of descent from the sky is a potent one in Tibet's pre-Buddhist traditions, particularly in the stories of the advent of the lineage of Tibetan rulers. Thus, the story of the advent of the *dharma* quite deliberately takes the pre-Buddhist motif and turns it to a Buddhist use, swapping Buddhist books for the imperial ancestor. The imperial line is still there, but now the Tibetan king is the recipient of the advent of the new religion. And the emblems of this new religion emphasise that the new order is a written one, that a religion of the book is replacing the old order.

Yet for some Tibetan Buddhists, this story, which was supposed to celebrate the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet and foreshadow its victory over Tibet's earlier traditions, contained a bit too

---

4 Uebach 1987: 86-87.

5 On this text and its Chinese counterparts, see van Schaik 2018.

much of the flavour of those earlier traditions. In the thirteenth century, when the stories of "the advent of the sublime *dharma*" were circulating in numerous histories of Buddhism in Tibet, Nel pa Paṇḍita (b. 13th c.) wrote a history of Buddhism known as *The Flower Garland (Me tog 'phreng ba)* in which he disputed the accepted version of the episode and offered an alternative in its place. Nel pa Paṇḍita agreed that the first appearance of the Buddha's teachings in Tibet did indeed occur during the reign of Lha Tho tho ri, but, he said, the books did not fall from the sky. In Nel pa Paṇḍita's version, the books were brought to Tibet by an Indian scholar, who hoped to teach Buddhism to the king. But since the king couldn't read, he gave up on that plan, and set off for China instead, leaving behind some of his books and suggesting that the king pay homage to them regularly.

Nel pa Paṇḍita castigated those who repeated the story of the books falling from the sky as "rumor-mongers" (*g.yom rgyug*). He also claimed that the source of this story was the Bon po. I have translated Nel pa Paṇḍita's account of the episode here in full:

> "Our Teacher, He who has Gone to Bliss, the Perfect Buddha Śākyamuni, turned the wheel of the *dharma* in Jambudvīpa for a long time, but not in Tibet, the land of snowy mountains, with its hillsides of flint and grass and its masses of dense forests. Since the Teacher never set foot in this kingdom of mountains and snow and it was not pervaded by the light rays of his speech, this was an unfortunate period. In this situation, when even the words "the three jewels" were unknown, the advent of the sublime *dharma* came during the reign of Lha Tho tho ri Snyan btsan.
>
> Now, let us explain the historical account in detail. At the time when this sublime sage controlled the kingdom, Li The se and a translator from Tukhāra called Blo sems mtsho invited the Indian *paṇḍita* Mkhas pa Legs byin, who taught the *dharma* to the king. Because there was no writing in Tibet at that time, it proved impossible to train [the king]. So then they wrote down and offered the king the *Kāraṇḍavyūha sūtra*, the six-syllable mantra written in gold, and the *Mudrā Gestures* (*Mu tra'i phyag rgya*).[6] [The *paṇḍit*a] said: "Pay homage to [these books] by prostrating to them, circumambulating them, and making offerings, and whatever blessing you desire will arise. Even if I were to stay in Tibet, there would be no further benefit." With that, he left for China.
>
> Most people, relying on rumor-mongers, say, "tied to a sunbeam, the *Hundred Pang kong* descended onto the upper story of the royal palace." Those who claim that this came from the sky have allowed themselves to be corrupted by the Bon pos.
>
> Then the king gave [the objects] the name "secret power" and placed them on a throne of precious jewels, inside a silver-gilt casket, and prayers and offerings were directed to it.[7]

[6] In the manuscript edition of Uebach 1987, an interlinear note appears here, stating that the six-syllable mantra was written "in the Rañjana (*lan tsha*) script, on a yellow scroll."

[7] The text here in fact gives "curtain" (*yol ba*) rather than the usual casket (*sgrom bu*), but since the books are to be placed "inside" (*nang du*), it seems that a casket is probably intended, and *yol ba* may be a scribal error.

[Vessels] filled with butter, beer and the like were offered, and prostrations and circumambulations were performed. Due to this, the king's authority and dominion were greatly increased. The ruler obtained two bodies in one lifetime, so that his reign was very long; a certain blind prince was able to open his eyes; and the subjects had great good fortune.

I have heard that later, when Bsam yas was constructed, the "secret power" was placed inside a white *stūpa*.

Such is [the historical account of] the advent of the *dharma* [in Tibet]."[8]

As we can see here, in his version of the advent of Buddhism in Tibet, Nel pa Paṇḍita specifically associates the story of books falling from the sky with the Bon po, and accuses other Buddhist historians who repeat the story of having been corrupted by the Bon po. When he attributes the story of the books falling from the sky to the Bon pos, Nel pa Paṇḍita is not just making an observation about Bon po beliefs, but engaging in an ongoing polemic between Buddhist and Bon po versions of Tibetan history. Buddhists and Bon pos often gave alternative versions of the same events in their historical texts; for example, the Buddhist activities of Srong bstan Sgam po celebrated by the Buddhist historians are lamented by the Bon po historians as an adoption of a foreign religion and a persecution of the genuine Tibetan religion. By placing the story of the books falling from the sky on the Bon po side of history, Nel pa Paṇḍita attempts to take it out of the purview of Buddhist historians entirely.[9]

The story he puts in its place eschews the miraculous entirely, and relies on the Buddhist trope of missionary activity. Once Nel pa Paṇḍita's version was out there, later Tibetan writers of Buddhist histories usually felt it necessary to consider it alongside the story of the books falling from the sky. For example, the fifteenth-century scholar 'Gos Lo tsa ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392-1481) considered both versions in his *Blue Annals*, before coming out in favour of Nel pa Paṇḍita:

"Nel pa Paṇḍita said that the Bon po claim that things fell from the sky because they adore the sky. The truth behind this Bon po tale, he said, is that the *dharma* was brought by the *paṇḍita* Blo sems 'tsho and the translator Li The se. Since the king could neither read the writing nor understand the meaning, the *paṇḍita* and the translator went back again. This seems to be correct."[10]

Others were less sympathetic to Nel pa Paṇḍita's version. The Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang Blo bzang Rgya mtsho (1617-1682) mentioned both versions in his *Song of the Spring Queen*, before directing this *ad hominem* thrust at Nel pa Paṇḍita:

---

[8] Translated from the Tibetan edition in Uebach 1987: 84-86 (ff. 7a1-7b4).

[9] On the interplay between Buddhist and Bon po histories, see Bjerken 2003. On Bon po – Buddhist polemics see Martin 2001, which also has an extensive bibliography of Bon po studies.

[10] *Deb ther sngon po*: 63-64; Roerich 1949: 38. Note that this retelling actually simplifies Nel pa Paṇḍita's version slightly, and does not mention the Indian *paṇḍita* Mkhas pa Legs byin.

> "Nel pa Paṇḍita's claim that it is irrational for things to fall from the sky is proof of his small-mindedness. In the auspicious circumstances of the advent of the *dharma*, the magical activities and compassion of the noble ones are beyond rational thought."[11]

The Fifth Dalai Lama, in defending the story of the books falling from the sky, considers this a debate about the role of thinking (*bsams*). He suggests that Nel pa Paṇḍita simply couldn't bring himself to believe that books could fall from the sky, and came up with a more reasonable version of the episode because he considered the story "irrational" (*mi 'thad pa*). But this merely goes to show his limited outlook, which does not have room for events that transcend the rational. The Fifth Dalai Lama then argues that things do happen that transcend rational thought, especially in special circumstances like the first appearance of Buddhism in Tibet.

It is often assumed that historical writing in a religious context is very different from our modern, critical approach to history. Accordingly, much of what we find in traditional Tibetan histories is often considered within the category of religious legend. It then becomes the modern historian's task to try to discern what true events might lie behind such legends. Yet we should be cautious of these assumptions, not only because they limit our own appreciation of Tibetan historical writing, which becomes mere raw material to be mined for nuggets of truth, but because they do a disservice to the Tibetan Buddhist historians themselves. However, we should be careful not to fall into the trap of seeing this merely as case of a rational account opposed to an irrational one. If we look closely at Nel pa Paṇḍita's version, it is not an example of thoroughgoing rationalism as we would understand it. He provides no previous source for his own version of the episode, and leaves undisputed the miraculous occurrences that came of the king's worship of the "secret power." The struggle here is more about controlling the history of Buddhism in Tibet and its relationship to the tradition that preceded it.

In conclusion, let us take note of a few interesting points: (i) Nel pa Paṇḍita does not believe that a story is accurate merely because it has appeared in previous historical accounts, and for him the religious authority of Buddhism is cast into doubt by the suspicion that the narrative of books falling from the sky is actually Bon po in origin. (ii) Historians coming after Nel pa Paṇ-ḍita don't try to smooth over this wrinkle in the historical account. 'Gos Lo tsa ba gives both versions, and also considers it his duty to assess them, offering his opinion that Nel pa Paṇḍita's version "seems to be more correct" (*dag pa 'dra*). (iii) Some other historians prefer the narrative of the books falling from the sky, and the Fifth Dalai Lama, recognising that the strength of Nel pa Paṇḍita's version is that it seems more rational, argues that important historical events in the transmission of Buddhism may go beyond the limits of the rational mind.

Thus, the story of the advent of the *dharma*, and Tibetan Buddhist historians' response to it reveal some of the tensions in the self-identity of Buddhists in Tibet, specifically in how Tibetans attempted to distinguish themselves as Buddhists from the tradition that came before them. In this case, the debates involved the role of intellectual thought and rationality in Buddhism. The original story cleverly took a motif from Tibet's pre-Buddhist traditions and made it a feature of the turning

---

[11] Nor brang O rgyan, *Dpyid kyi rgyal mo'i glu dbyangs kyi 'grel pa yid kyi dga' ston:* 60-61.

point between pre-Buddhist Tibet and Buddhist Tibet. But this had repercussions later for Tibetan Buddhists' arguments for the superiority of Buddhism over what came before. For if Buddhism came to Tibet in a style so reminiscent of the Bon po, how could it be held up as a rational religion of the book?

References

Anonymous. 1989. *Bka' chems ka khol ma*. Kan su'u zhing chen grangs nyung mi rigs kyi gna' dpe legs sgrig gzhung sgrub khang (ed.). Lanzhou: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang.

Bjerken, Zeff. 2003. Hall of mirrors: Tibetan religious histories as mimetic narratives, *Acta Orientalia* 64: 177-223.

van der Kuijp, Leonard. 1996. Tibetan historiography, in: Cabezón, J. I. and R. R. Jackson (eds.), *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 43-45.

'Gos Lo tsa ba Gzhon nu dpal. 1984. *Deb ther sngon po*. 2 Vols. Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang.

Honko, Lauri. 1996. Epic and identity: national, regional, communal, individual, *Oral Tradition* 11(1): 18-36.

Cabezón, José Ignacio and Roger R. Jackson (eds.), *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion.

Martin, Dan. 1997. *Tibetan Histories: A Bibliography of Tibetan-Language Historical Works*. London: Serindia publications.

— 2001. *Unearthing Bon Treasures: Life and Contested Legacy of a Tibetan Scripture Revealer, with a General Bibliography of Bon*. Leiden: Brill.

Nor brang O rgyan. 1993. *Dpyid kyi rgyal mo'i glu dbyangs kyi 'grel pa yid kyi dga' ston*. Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang.

Wangdu, Pasang and Hildegard Diemberger. 2000. *dBa' bzhed: The Royal Narrative Concerning the Bringing of Buddha's Doctrine to Tibet*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Roerich, G. N. 1949. *The Blue Annals*. Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal.

van Schaik, Sam. 2013. The naming of Tibetan religion: *Bon* and *chos* in the imperial period, *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research* 1: 227-57.

— 2018. Dharma from the sky: the Pangkong prayer, *Central Asiatic Journal* 61(1): 61-69.

Stein, Rolf A. 1986. Tibetica Antiqua IV: la tradition relative au début du bouddhisme au Tibet, *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* 75(1): 169-196.

Uebach, Helga. 1987. *Nel-pa Paṇḍita's Chronik Me-tog Phreṅ-ba: Handschrift der Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. Tibetischer Text in Faksimile, Transkription und Übersetzung*. München: Kommission für Zentralasiatische Studien, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Vostrikov, A. I. 1995. *Tibetan Historical Literature*. Translated from the Russian by Harish Chandra Gupta. London: Routledge.