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TIBETAN OUTLOOK ON MONASTIC LIFE

Men Called for Monastic Life

In the Tibetan way of thinking, living beings are classified into three broad divisions. Each division is a meeting place *(hDu)* of kindred spirits, beings with similar faculties. But it is also a combination of particular aspects of life. The distinguishing feature in the divisions is the presence or absence of 'conscious conception' *(hDu-SHes,* in Sanskrit *sam-jñā),* the capacity to think and reason, to be aware of oneself and the surroundings. The world is a concatenation of these divisions and aspects; it is indeed a 'confection' *(hDu-Byid,* in Sanskrit *sam-skāra).* The basic idea is one of coming together, a patterning of factors and events.

The first division of human beings is characterized by the obvious presence of the thinking faculty, of the capacity to reason *(SHes).* Human beings are included in this group. The second is distinguished by the absence of this faculty, and it includes higher animals that operate not with reason but on the basis of instincts and impulses. The third division comprises the lower animals that do not appear to have even instincts or impulses. The Tibetan nomenclature for the last division, "Without either the presence or absence of thinking" *(hDu-SHes-Med-Min),* suggest the inapplicability of the criterion of reason to this group. The first division is rational and moral, the second irrational and amoral; and for the third group the ideas of reason or morality do not apply.

Among the human beings who constitute the first division, there are again three groups, described in Tibetan as the three 'ways' *(CHen-pai Lam).* First, there are the 'natural' persons. Although they can reason, they hardly ever bother to, beyond what relates to common problems of daily life. They follow their

natural inclinations, and seek to satisfy their bodily urges and appetites; they are worldlings, with no higher aspirations. Their spiritual orientations are minimal, if not totally absent. The second group consists of more advanced beings who are not only aware of higher values in life but strive to fulfil them to a limited extent. They are religious, but they are also involved in the world. Their chief concern is to strike the most advantageous balance between them. The third group is composed of the more evolved human beings, who can be called saints. They are wholly devoted to the religious goal to the point of exclusion of all forms of worldly involvement. It is they who resort to monasteries.

The Tibetan Religion

The religion in Tibet—being monastic in essential orientation—naturally idealizes the status of the recluse and saint, and attaches great value to monastic discipline and meditational practices. But there is a ready recognition that the first group of human beings are the most numerous; that the bulk of mankind anywhere fits in here. Religion addresses itself to them with grave misgivings. But the second group, while not being so numerous, is yet considerably vast. Religion is more hopeful of them while being well aware of their limitations. The religion prescribed for them is mainly a pattern of virtuous living, pious transaction, prayer and worship. Faith in mind *(Dad-pa),* recitation of texts in speech *(CHos-hDon),* and in body prostrations with offerings *(mCHod-pa)* constitute religion for the Tibetan laity. Meditational practice is not obligatory for them. Even among the ordained monk its employment is minimal.

But those who come together in the third group are the more earnest among the laity as well as among monastic settlements. Meditation occupies a favoured position in their life. They are well on the 'way', *(Lam)* moving in the direction of the goal. For them the 'road is open' *(Lam-Tar);* there are no obstructions either from the field of desire or from that of Form. It is necessary for such a wayfarer to choose, accept and follow 'the guide on the road' *(Lam-mKHan)*, a teacher, usually from within monastic settlements.

There is in every religion an inevitable gap between theory and practice. And although all religions emphasize the greater

value of practice, the theory invariably succeeds playing a dominating role. It is for this reason the strict Tantric outlook prescribes exclusive attention to practice. But practice should draw its inspiration and sustenance from theory. Like India, Tibet also has encountered this paradox.

Tibetan Canon is relatively vast in number; it comprises hundreds of texts which are practical in import; there is besides, a much larger quantity of purely theoretical literature. And there are hundreds of manuals which seek to explain the canonical texts of practical import. There are scholars who specialize in this aspect of the Canon, and their help is invaluable for hermits who devote themselves exclusively to practice. There are teachers who explain texts, prepare manuals and instruct the practitioners. There are also masters, who are more involved in practice themselves, and who can prescribe precepts for practice. But more important than these two classes of guides are the 'secret preceptors' *(gSang-sTon),* who can explain practical details on the basis of their own experiences and relate them to theoretical formulations in the texts.

Theory and Practice in Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism, which is Tantric, has solved the problem of Theory-Practice *(rTogs-sPyod),* with emphasis on the latter. The serious student is recommended to plan his career in three phases: study *(THoS,* 'hearing', Skt. *sravana),* reflection *(bSam,* 'thinking', 'considering', Skt. *manana)* and contemplation *(sGrub* 'carrying out', 'performing', or *sGom* 'meditation', Skt. *nididhyāsana* or *dhyāna).* The usual advice is to study the doctrine first, then master it, and finally set about practising it. Study is a necessary preparation and its value is not ignored. bLa-Ma Sangs-Pa counselled rMog-CHog-Pa, who was only seventeen: "You should study in your youth. If you begin to meditate without having first studied, the demons may carry you away!" Urgyan-Pa (born 1230), who was celebrated as a *mahāsiddha* (éminent adept), resolved even as a boy: "I shall study first, and then practise. I shall then know the difference between the present state of my mind and the state of my mind in meditation". Meditation is described as "removal of the wall that separates this life from the next".

Books are therefore considered as an important equipment of every lama even if he intends becoming a hermit. Every monastery guards its library with remarkable zeal, and the fame of a monastery is largely dependent upon the size of its library. Books of practical value are carefully secreted and are not readily shown to the uninitiated. In fact, during initiation, it is customary to place such a book on the head of the aspirant, signifying a formal transmission of wisdom contained in it. A piece of advice that is frequently repeated is: "There is no benefit in a *kalyāna-mitra* except in books".

But this important position given to books is not unqualified. There is a warning, frequently given, that too much of involvement with books is likely to render one indifferent to meditation. Sharpening the mind deadens the heart; and preoccupation with acquisition of bookish knowledge may preclude wisdom from dawning. The *Blue Annals* record the eminent master KHu (b. 1191 A.D.) as saying: "Images and books are too numerous. We should practise meditation. A single hermit is better than a hundred *Prajñāpāramitā* texts in a hundred thousand verses *(śatasāhasrikā)* written in gold!"

There is a nice story to illustrate the relative value of books and meditation. rNa of sPar Phu, proud of his learning, went to meet the meditation master hGro-mGon (1110-1170 A.D.) at the PHag-Mo-Gru Monastery. The master welcomed him, made an imprint of a splendid lotus flower in brown sugar, and offered it to him. The scholar turned it over and over in his hands and admired its beauty. He would not eat it because he could not bring himself to cut that charming piece into bits. Thereupon the master took the piece, broke it into two bits and gave the bits back to him, saying "Now, eat." The scholar ate the piece and enjoyed its taste. The master explained: "Your studies are like this imprint of the lotus flower. You could hold the imprint in your hand and admire its form. But you could not enjoy its taste until you broke it up and put into your mouth. Scholarship is a mere form; it would be useless unless it is brought into your own experience by meditation. The purpose of all this learning is to help meditation. You must focus your attention on that". The teaching of hGro-mGon came to be known as "the taste of brown sugar". rNa took lessons from him in meditation and soon became an adept *(siddha)*. Later, as many as five hundred hermits gathered round him to learn meditation from him. He was cele-

brated as "the greatest in wisdom." Because of the monastery he established at sPar-Phu, he became known as sPar-PHu-Ba. Towards the end of his life he not only wrote manuals on Nāgārjuna's *Six Treatises,* but preached extensively. He used to say: "First meditate, and then preach and continue the lineage".

Theory thus would be proper only when practice has accomplished its end. It can never be a substitute for practice. So great was the insistence of the old masters on practice, that long years were diligently spent in seclusion before an involvement with theory began. Preaching was a necessary duty on the part of a lama because his compassion towards all beings must be expressed in transmitting the excellent doctrine. This is a familiar *Mahayāna* attitude. The vow of the *bodhisattva* (and of every earnest lama that seeks to reach this status) is to labour for the welfare of all beings. And preaching is the major mode so far as a lama is concerned. But for preaching to be effective, it is necessary to meditate first: "First meditate and then preach."

It may, however, so happen that meditation covers the major period of life. For instance, sGro (born 1078 A.D.), the eminent master took to meditation when he was forty and finished it when seventyone, and then he preached for just four years before he passed away in 1153 A.D. Preaching was also indicated "to continue the lineage", which was necessary to preserve the saving grace of the Doctrine for the benefit of the suffering humanity. When a master was asked, "What is more profitable: to stay in seclusion (and meditate) or to labour for the welfare of beings?" He replied: "By entering into seclusion you will also be labouring for the welfare of beings!".

In order to emphasize the necessity and value of practice, sometimes the study of scriptures was discouraged. hBrom (died 1064 A.D.), the famous successor to the Indian master Atīśa-Dīpamkara, counselled sPyan-sNa: "It is impossible to read the 84,00 sections of the Doctrine. Therefore meditate on *Sunyatà* only!". There is the story of a lama who carried a load of books on his back, beating his chest with his hand, and lamenting that years of study had disappointed him. The 'wandering master of La-sTod' advised him: "Such is study! The end of knowledge can never be reached! It is like drinking water from a mirage! Throw away the books, and meditate!" But it is usual to recommend that study and meditation should go hand in hand. Each should

supplement the other. Study in this sense has been described as "completing the corners of practice".

Notwithstanding the enormous importance attached to the teacher, it is recognized that real help can only come from within. "The best *Kalyānamitra* is your own mind." This Buddhist expression for the *guru* or guide is an interesting one; *Kalyānamitra* is 'the friend who works for your welfare'; he works with you intimately, and with perfect understanding and sympathy. Here is a piece of counsel that a Tibetan master (Dam-pa) gave to his pupil who asked him "When in doubt, whom should I ask when you are gone"?

> The best *kalyāṇamitra* is your own mind! The teacher, who is capable of ridding you of your doubts, will arise from within your own mind. Should you be in need of another *kalyānamitra,* that would be the excellent scripture *Prajñāpāramitrā,* Study the text carefully. The human *kalyānamitra,* the individual who teaches, is indeed the lowest kind of *kalyānamitra,* because his help is limited.
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> *(Blue Annals,* XI, 146)

When the Mind of the practitioner is ripe, it is believed that the proper teacher will arrive, prompted by the inexplicable Karmic pressure. The Mind may even materialize the teacher! The effective teacher is not one who merely knows and is still practising, but one who has already "gone there" and experienced directly. Tibetans distinguish between the written or spoken explanations of a text by a mere scholarly teacher ('Black-Instruction', *Nag-KHrid)* and the explanations based on one's own experience ('White-Instruction', *dMar-KHrid).* The latter are doubtless more valuable.

Many details of the 'White-Instruction' naturally are not written down, but remain 'oral precepts'. To obtain them, one should approach a master, receive initiation from him, and begin practising. It is said that the Doctrine that enlightens and liberates is in four major streams:

1) elaborate commentaries on the basic texts;
2) oral precepts and personal notes;
3) initiations and practical guidance; and
4) the practice (meditation and worship).

They are arranged in the order of increasing importance. The teacher's role consists in making his pupil increasingly competent to pass from one stream to the other. Reliance on the teacher, therefore, does not absolve the pupil of the necessity of exerting himself so as to become ultimately independent of the teacher. The Buddha said: "The enlightened ones only show the way; the going is your own concern". The accepted system is the firm ground on which we set out, the chosen teacher directs our attention and lights up the path; but our resolution, wisdom and energy must take us across.

Initiation to Monastic Life

Before one launches on any serious enterprise adequate preparation is necessary. One needs not only to be informed about modes and methods to be pursued and the goals to be reached, but also to be prepared and primed. Priming in spiritual matters takes the form of initiation. As an aspect that is common to all religions, it assumes special significance in the Tantric framework. An intense religious career is heralded by initiation, which is both a commitment and an equipment. "To make ripe a raw individual, initiation is necessary", said Kun-dGa.

Initiation *(diksha,* Tib. *dBang bsKur),* in practice, is a procedure whereby the power of one is transmitted to the other. The Sanskrit expression is made up of two roots; the former *(di)* signifying "endowment, gift equipment" and the latter *(ksha)* indicating "elimination, removal, destruction". The import is that the hindrances in the individual must be removed before he can pursue the path successfully; and concurrently, a clear insight and a firm trust are to be generated in him. In effect, one who seeks initiation must cease to be a normal individual with natural inclinations and passions, and be ready to be 're-born' into a new life of higher values. It is a total transformation that occurs; the coordinates of the initiate become altogether different. He begins a career of intense devotion and extraordinary effort. He becomes 'consecrated' to the path.

Initiations take many forms. Even objects and places can come within the scope of its impact. Blessing a vase or a house, empowering a scroll-painting, image of a deity or of a lama-teacher, a diagram *(mandala)* for contemplation or worship, a rosary or a

rDo-rJe bell, and infusing charm into a thread of wool or a piece of paper essentially partake of the nature of transmitting of power. But initiation in the present context is transaction between the teacher in whom the power resides and the pupil who is ready to share it with him. It is usually a rite (although not necessarily so), involving ritualistic purification of body and mind, *(kriya-diksha),* awakening of the psychic centres *(cakraśodha),* and transmission of the formula for incantation or a method for contemplation. And as the rite consists in the employment of consecrated water with which the initiate is given a ceremonial bath, or which is merely sprinkled on the head and limbs of the devotee, the rite is also called *abhisheka.*

The initiation not only cleanses the body, speech and mind of the initiate, but places some power at his disposal, thus making him capable of receiving the higher wisdom that comes either from the *guru* or from contemplation. In this sense, it authorizes him to obtain advanced instructions or to have access to special teachings in a secret text. At the same time, there is a firm commitment on the part of the initiate *(samaya,* 'pledge', 'oath') with regard to certain observances and abandonments; his behaviour is now strictly stylized, and he enters into a peculiar relationship with his teacher who has been responsible for his initiation. This is called *'guru-yoga'*, a kind of spiritual identification with his teacher and with the lineage of teachers which he represents. This is described as an intense mental effort which does away with the difference between the doctrine and his own teacher.

The teacher's precepts are useless if they are received and retained only in the manner of pouring water from one vessel into another. And those precepts fail to enter the depths of consciousness because of what is called 'the sealed knot of the mind' or 'the knots of heart', *hrdaya-granthi* in the Upanishads. Unless this knot is loosened hesitation torments the devotee. Initiation is a procedure for this loosening of the mind's knot. Tying a knot and loosening it are magical rites, intended to heal the sick. The mind's sloth and ailments are removed here. There is a saying recorded in the *Blue Annals:* "Hesitation is the greatest among creations of the devils. One should perform initiation right now, even if necessary provisions are not available." It is in this sense that initiation has been explained as the direct contact between the mind and the doctrine.

Tibetan imagination described this as contact between 'the stone and the bone' *(rDo-Rus-PHrag):* "If one wishes to eat the marrow of the bone he should crush the bone with the stone." Mind is the bone, and enlightenment is the marrow contained in it. The doctrine is the stone. Applying the stone to the bone is the act of initiation. The bone is hard and does not yield the marrow readily. It needs repeated crushing, and the initiation marks the commencement of this procedure.

The Way of Meditation and Austerities

Although the Buddha advocated the Middle Path, eschewing the extremes of asceticism and enjoyment, self-mortification and self-indulgence, total denial and total acceptance, he nevertheless emphasized the necessity of an austere life, the need for seclusion and the advantages of a contemplative life. In all the countries which have accepted Buddhism, monasteries are essentially places for quiet and secluded meditation. In Tibet, where the approach to Buddhism is Tantric, there is an arrangement both within the monastery and outside it for considerable stretches of absolute isolation and uninterrupted meditation.

The amount of importance attached to austerities and asceticism—sometimes of extreme severity—in Tibet appears to be somewhat inconsistent with the Buddha's teaching. The explanation offered is that while these austerities by themselves are not important, they must be observed because the Great Sage, the Buddha, had observed them. And because the Buddha practised austerities for six years, it is suggested that the ascetic who follows him must also observe a six-year period of austerities, after which he is free either to continue them or give them up. But the real reason seems to be the impact of the Indian Yogis on the Tibetan religious life, which already had a predisposition to severe practices under Bon influence. Magical rituals and austerities go together. The path to obtain and employ power is opposed to the path of ease and pleasure. Fasts, sensory deprivations, postural rigidity, ceaseless circumambulations, repetition of the sacred formulae for hours on end, keeping of vigils during nights, the practice of rites in burning or burial grounds, the vow of complete silence, periodical isolation, voluntary poverty, and mutilation are associated with magic everywhere in the world. This was also the magical heritage in Tibet; and the Indian impact only strengthened it.

The Seven Vows of Kagyu

The sect founded by Marpa (1012-1097 A.D.) in Tibet known as Kagyu (bKah-brGyud), incorporates the essential elements of the ascetic traditions of India. The ascetics of this sect have a seven-fold vow to keep:

1. the ascetic should not visit his home on any pretext;
2. he should not cross the threshold of any layman's house;
3. he should not come down from the mountain retreat (where he has retired for practice) until the stipulated period is over;
4. he should sit up continuously in the meditational posture of crossed legs and joined palms;
5. he should not lie down during nights—he should snatch moments of sleep even as he sits;
6. he should wear but a single white sheet of cotton, whatever the vagaries of the weather, even in blizzards and snow-falls;
7. he should remain uninterruptedly silent, without communicating his thoughts or desires even by facial expressions or hand gestures.

In addition, some ascetics will undertake regular visits to the haunted places every night, and practise meditation there *(gNam-KHrod).*

The Common Ascetical Practices

Together with such rather severe and special vows mentioned above, there are many more minor ones to observe in common with other monks of the order. These are regarded as three-fold efforts, *(Bad-Pa):* of the body *(Lus);* of the mind *(Sems);* and of the speech (gNag). It is obvious that this is a direct borrowing from Indian sources. 'Bodily efforts' include salutations and prostrations, circumambulations, turning the Mani-Wheel, and offering of ritual pieces. Telling the rosary, although a physical act, is regarded as a speech-expression. Like the Indian rosary, the Tibetan rosary consists of 108 (the sa-sKya group prefers 111) beads, which are moved in a circular fashion to the accompaniment of a sacred formula (usually *Om Mani-padme Hum),* or a seed-syllable for each bead-movement. This movement in practice, however, is not always accompanied by verbalization with the laity; so it

becomes a mechanical affair, and can be regarded only as 'bodily-effort'. But when it is seriously taken up, the movement of the beads is a substitute for utterance of the formula. When the count is measured upto 10,800 tolls during the course of a day, or in a sitting, it becomes an act of asceticism. Similarly, transcription of sacred texts and inscription of the *Mani*-formula on stone slabs can be substitutes for verbal-effort, although the major involvement is the physical act.

'Speech-efforts' include chanting of selected texts and preaching. Recital and exposition of scriptural texts, discussions and debates on doctrinal matters, reading and writing of sacred literature, even wood-block printing of the 330 volumes of Canonical texts (which practice, borrowed from the Chinese, has been in vogue in Tibet since the eleventh century) are regarded as "mouth-religion" *(KHa-dPe* and *CHos-sKod),* notwithstanding the bodily effort involved in them. Reading aloud of scriptures, muttering of the *Mani*-formula, utterance of spells while offerings are made, preparation of *mandala* for sacramental purposes and intoning the sacred formulae while telling the beads on the rosary are illustrations of the verbal expressions of religious activity *(CHos hDon).*

According to the Tibetan way of thinking (as in the Indian) man's existence has three aspects: body, speech and mind. And mind is said to be the King while the other two are servants. Therefore, mental effort is considered supremely important in religion. Mind is distinguished by its capacity to have faith *(Dad-pa):* reliance on the Doctrine, devotion to the 'three perfect ones' (the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha), reverence for the saints and gods, desire for emancipation *(THar-ba),* and the vow of the *bodhisattva* are all so many expressions of faith. Mind *(Sems)* is naturally and normally filled with 'sin' *(sDig-pa).* This Tibetan expression also means 'scorpion', which is known for its sting, and 'crab' which is well-known for its hold. Evil not only holds the mind in its clutches but produces pain by its sting. Religion is an attempt to relieve the mind of this 'sin'. And faith is the first effort to relieve the mind of its hold and sting.

Studying the doctrine, understanding its tenets, and developing an insight into its import are likewise efforts of the mind. Bu-sTon urges that one must study the Doctrine with a sense of urgency: for it is only in the present time that the Buddha has appeared, and when our minds are favourably disposed to-

wards his Doctrine we must take advantage of it; procrastination may deprive us of the present opportunity of a favourable condition of existence. As a first step towards study, and a necessary prerequisite, is faith in the Doctrine, reverence for the teacher, and confidence in our ability to understand. Symbolic hand gestures *(PHyag-rGya),* conceptualizing thought-processes during certain rites and mental offerings in ceremonial sequences, are also included in the same category.

All these are relatively minor, and routine matters. Although they do involve withdrawal in varying degrees from normal biological and social activities and effort of varying intensity, they can hardly be regarded as ascetic practices. But the ideal of an ascetic is always prized highly. The Buddha himself is regarded as a 'great ascetic' *(mahāśramana).* And even normal folk periodically turn into ascetics now and then, albeit for a stipulated, and usually brief, period. A monk who lives in strict conformity with the ascetic ideals ingrained in Indian and Tibetan Tantric tradition merits great reverence and adoration.

The Search for Pleasure and Power

The two goals of the Tantric way of life are pleasure and power. The urge for pleasure both here and hereafter is, of course, the more popular motivation; but it is regarded as 'lower' *Tantra.* The longing for power (power over others, powers to accomplish things more speedily and better, power to secure wealth, and so on) has resulted in magical practices, which are included in the 'midling' *Tantra.* The utter unison of pleasure and power, but altogether divorced from the phenomenal context, occurs as 'emancipation' or 'freedom', the urge for which constitutes the 'higher' *Tantra.* Whatever the grade of the *Tantra,* the ascetic involvement is indispensable. Even to secure pleasure or power, one must undertake a strenuous course of asceticism, denying oneself smaller pleasures in the hope of obtaining greater pleasures, or forsaking lesser power in the expectation of higher powers. Giving up in order to get, abandoning in order to obtain, suffering now in order to be later comforted, and welcoming pain as a prelude to happiness and setting boundaries in order to attain complete freedom are necessarily involved in the Tantric approach.

Important in this context is the Tibetan expression *mTHSams,* which literally mean "boundary-line", "border", "demarcation",

"frontier". It is what marks off an area, a kind of partition, within which one must continue and beyond which one may not stay. The word is employed to connote the extremities of one's property, as well as a line of demarcation drawn in a magical rite. In the latter sense, space enclosed by this line is regarded as endowed with magical power; any act done here, and any person staying here would be extraordinary, consecrated, magically equipped, and potent. The same thing done or the same person staying outside these limits would be ordinary. The Tibetan word has also a secondary meaning: "to plan", "to resolve", "to settle one's mind". In the meditational context the two meanings are fused. It means resolving to set up a boundary for oneself, to draw a barrier round oneself, and to cut oneself off from the surrounding *(mTHSams gCHod-pa).*

Life in Seclusion

Seclusion is achieved in several ways. One of the most frequently employed procedures is to retire into a distant hermitage, a solitary house, hut or cell in a monastery, or to a cave in some mountain fastness, and to vow never to go out of it, nor admit any one within it. The withdrawal is voluntary and deliberate; or it may be at the suggestion of his *guru.* During this period there is a prior arrangement made to supply some scanty food and water to the person who enters into seclusion, through a narrow window or a small opening (called *Bug-Go),* without however an opportunity of seeing or talking with him. If the ascetic is a well-to-do layman he may himself arrange for food with his own family or with a family in the vicinity of his seclusion by paying for the service. There are ascetics who vow to what is known as "water and stone fasting". They are said to drink small quantities of water and munch tiny pebbles in order to survive!

The period of seclusion may last several months, and in some cases it may extend to a couple of years. The classical prescribed term used to be three years, three months and three days. The Kālacakra ascetics observe seclusion for three years, three half-months and three days. The underlying belief is that the human constitution undergoes a marked change during this period. The Kagyu hermits prefer a seven-year or twelve-year seclusion. It is more usual for monks or serious laymen to go into seclusion

every year lasting a few weeks. It is also an accepted practice to snatch brief moments of seclusion everyday in the morning, noon, evening and night. Some hermits wander into cemeteries and spend the nights under a lonely tree or in an empty cave in the neighbourhood of the village. Seclusions are occasionally observed under the waning moon.

While in seclusion, the ascetic must consecrate himself entirely to meditational practice and related study. The purpose of seclusion is to enable the ascetic to apply himself to the practice with the same zeal as that of parents bringing up their only child, or that of a "wool-cleaner washing the wool". Frequent descriptions of steadfast practice are: "without loosening the belt", "without placing head on pillow for years", "till his waist became sore", and "till the buttocks wore out". There is an interesting story concerning the famous ascetic-poet Milarepa:

> When his disciple sGam-Po-Pa was leaving Milarepa's hermitage after his study and practice, Milarepa accompanied him as far as a stream (for that was the customary send-off). He halted there, and told sGam-Po-Pa; "Child, I have a secret. Shall I reveal it to you now?" sGam-Po-Pa was eager to know. Milarepa turned and uncovered his own buttocks. sGam-Po-Pa was shocked to find his teacher's buttocks in such a terrible plight. They had completely worn out and blackened and were altogether devoid of flesh, because of constant sitting in meditation. Milarepa then told his disciple: "Son, the secret of success in meditation is diligence!"

Another celebrated, master, Dam-Pa, advised his equally celebrated disciple Kun-dGa (b. 1062 A.D.):

> Live in a cave which can hold one person only, and wear clothes just enough to cover your shame. Your food should not be more than what is sufficient to keep you alive. And practise meditation until you begin to hate it!

The final remark is a common expression for saying: practise continually and with a single-minded devotion. The import is a total and exclusive preoccupation with meditational practice. Seclusion is not merely a physical barrier excluding the ascetic from all normal contact with the surroundings. It is also a psychological barrier keeping away the normal mental processes. It

is indeed a "turning off". Cut off from the outside, it is a voyage into one's own interior. It is a kind of death so far as others are concerned, and so far as the individual's participation in the world is concerned. He is 'dead' for the world, and the world is 'dead' for him. But this death means a new life. Prevented from going forward, he starts going backward. Time stands still for him; and space is excluded from his consideration. Habitual sensations and perceptions, conceptions and feelings, plans and cares are shaken off and he begins to delve deep into his own psyche.

The Work in the Dark

Isolation is always well-planned. It is not a mere sinking into oblivion. According to Tibetan reckoning, "the work in the dark" comes only after "work in the open". The latter comprises studying the relevant texts, getting explanations from the teacher and observing the general rules of virtue. The practitioner, even while immured, is not all the time "in the dark". He can have a lamp (for which butter is supplied along with food periodically) and some books with him. He can break the 'barrier' when he feels like consulting his teacher, although it is usually not approved or encouraged.

"Work in the dark" is independent of books and teachers; it is essentially an encounter with one's own interior, exploiting one's own resources. Seclusions are described as 'dark'; and the *mTHSams* that the Tibetan yogi enters is indeed physically dark. It is not without a purpose that darkness is prescribed as favourable to meditational practice. Seclusion denotes withdrawal from the light of the day, the light which not only illumines the objects and aspects of the phenomenal world but facilitates transaction in it, and holds man captive in phenomenal involvement.

The Tibetan word *sNang-ba* means "to emit light", "to show up", "to shine". In this sense, it encompasses everything that is visible, all things that the organs of sense can apprehend. It also means "mental appearance", "thought", "idea of the world." In an extended sense it means "apparition", "phantom" *(sNang-gyi sPhrul-ba)*. The light outside not only shows up the objects of the world, but creates a net of appearances, conceptions and meanings within the mind. And conversely, the light of the mind illumines the world around and waves a meaningful context. It is the in-

terplay of these lights that makes our existence a weird maze of mystery, and a bundle of suffering.

The outer light so constantly and so glaringly shows up the external world, that one can hardly dare to look within; the light of the mind is naturally overwhelmed. But one who would look within must necessarily shut off the outer light. The practitioner would meditate during the day closing his eyes, but the outer light thereby is not entirely excluded. Although the physical objects are not directly perceived, their reflexions, partly visual and partly mental, would still be there. It is therefore that darkness is prescribed as helpful to meditation. In a sense, the light outside would restrict the light within; and darkness outside would help the light within shine brighter. And what is more important, darkness would emphasize the fact of isolation of the practitioner from the world.

In a well-known and oft-used Mahāyāna text, *Sūrangamasūtra,* there is an interesting dialogue, between the Buddha and his disciple Ananda. The Buddha ties a knot on a piece of cloth, while Ananda looks on, and ties another, and another. Seven knots are thus tied. Ananda agrees that not all the knots are the same, for they are tied in a specific order. The Buddha tells Ananda that in order to unite the knots, one must know how the knots are tied. Knowledge of the origin helps dissolution. And prompted by the Master, Ananda says that to unite the first knot one must start with the last knot, that one must proceed in a reverse order. The seven knots refer to the seven *cakras* in the human constitution; and the tying of knots is 'the dependent origination' *(pratityа samutpāda).* The last knot is the body which is positioned in the world. The first knot is hidden in the deepest layers of the mind. In order to move in the direction of the first knot, we must follow the reverse order by shutting off the outer light and beginning to 'work in the dark'. Thus this is an active process of "opening up" one's awareness to the internal modes which structure the external world and determine our involvement in it. It is an effort to posture the mind in itself. It marks a major shift in the mode of consciousness.